

## **Pioneers of Dialog: Socrates, Martin Buber, David Bohm\***

“What is more illuminating than light? Dialog!” This saying of Goethe is understandable when the participants in a dialog meet each other in such a way that each can say, “I feel understood, I understand the others and our topic of discussion has become clearer!” This happens in a dialog. Logos, meaning understanding, and insight into the subject, enters the whole being of the partners in dialogue (dia = through). It is the “light of understanding”, the logos, which makes the encounter so illuminating.

It is different with failed discussions, in controversies and conflicts. Each person is alone with their ideas, not reaching the others and not understood by the others. Emotions affect/rule actions, build walls between people or drive them to aggressive attacks. Mediators try to shift the parties in the dispute out of these emotional traps and into a process of understanding. The goal is that the disputing parties can better understand their own thoughts, feelings, wishes and behaviour and that through a shift in perspective they accordingly become able to understand the opposite party.

A differentiated perception of the processes of understanding can be a great help for mediators in supporting the disputing parties in finding ways out of their emotional tangles and towards understanding each other. Three pioneers of dialog shall serve as examples for this.

### **Socrates and the resurrection of consciousness in dialogue**

Socrates lived in Athens 2400 years ago at a time in which democracy was evolving there and the citizens were anxious to learn to speak openly in order to better be able to have influence on the city administration. Socrates was a philosopher and he saw it as his task as a teacher to initiate people's processes of development so that they could, in public and private life, “do good”. Socrates was convinced that community responsibility should only be taken on by those who could think soundly and independently and whose thoughts and actions stemmed from a levelheaded consciousness. He clearly told the Athenians that there is nothing more dangerous for the community than leaders who are convinced that they know what is good and right but in reality possess only pseudo-knowledge. He also did not shy away from engaging esteemed politicians, generals, priests, poets and trades people in discussions and checking if their knowledge was sham or really their own. In these debates it was regularly shown that his partner in conversation did not understand his own statements. The general could not explain what bravery was, the priest could not explain piety, the poet could not explain what he had written, etc.

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Plato, Socrates' most important student, wrote these dialogues down and therefore described Socrates as the prototype philosopher who advanced step by step toward a greater clarity of thought. Socrates asked questions and, above all, he questioned accepted knowledge. His main question was "What is...?", for example, "What is bravery?" His partners in discussion initially answered this question at a basic level with examples of bravery they believed to be true: "Bravery is when someone unflinchingly remains at the battle line and does not flee from the enemy!" Socrates could easily come up with other examples that proved the opposite and so show that belief which had not been reflected upon, based only on truisms, displayed only pseudo-knowledge. And he repeated his "What is..." question.

Now his discussion partner sought an answer on the next level: in the person themselves, in their attitudes. "Bravery is a certain resoluteness in the soul!" But this answer could also not hold out against Socrates questions, because resoluteness paired with stupidity cannot be called bravery. His partner in dialogue had not thought about the connection between resoluteness and bravery, but had only said out loud what they had believed to be their own opinion. As long as thought is based on unreflected, subjective beliefs, it is dependent on changing emotions and opinions that have been accepted from parents or tradition. The dialogue partner now noticed that it was necessary to think in a reasoning manner and they began now on a third level to define bravery in a conceptual way. But Socrates questioned these definitions as well, because the thinkers had not noticed or thought about the assumptions underlying their thought processes.

An effect of Socrates relentless questioning was to repeatedly unsettle his dialogue partner's self-satisfaction and pseudo-wisdom. Through this they experienced the state of ignorance and from this state honest questions evolved. They awoke in their consciousness and moved from the level of perception, to opinions, and finally to reasoned thinking. The fourth level was embodied in Socrates himself: the questioning and testing thinking which examines all the contents and processes of consciousness through dialogue. This thinking can be questioning because it is prepared to endure ignorance. And Socrates was aware of the fifth level, which was present in him: the light of consciousness and deliberation with which he illuminated the processes of understanding and ignorance through dialogue. Socrates wanted to teach the Athenians the ascent through all five steps so that they would be capable of "doing good" in every situation, through deliberation and their own understanding.

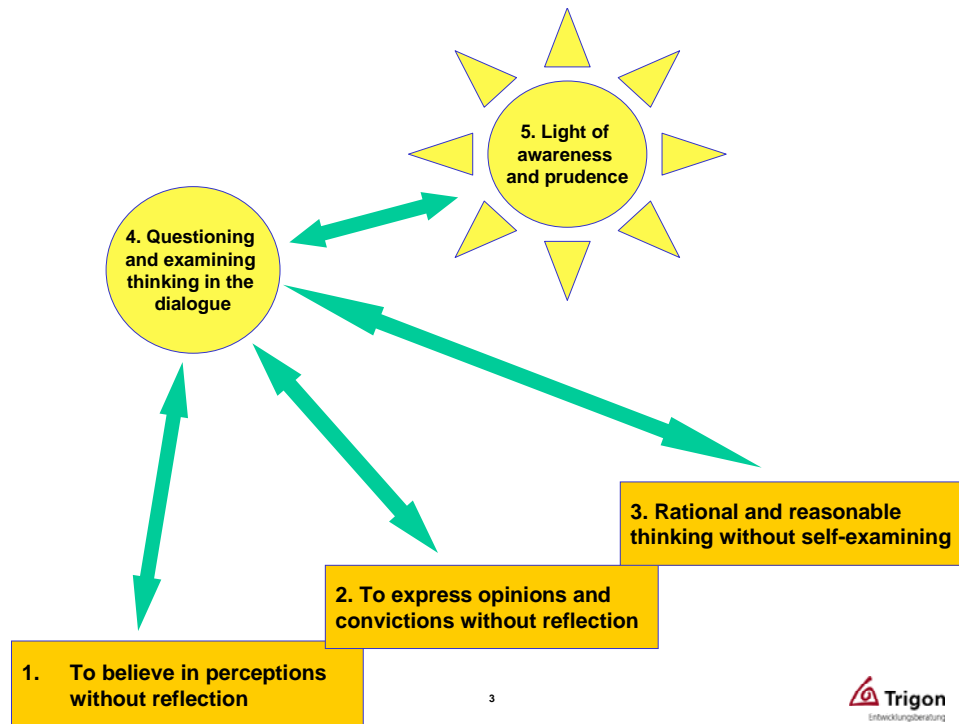


Abb. 2: The steps of advancement in consciousness

This insistence on independent thought, through which one could constantly scrutinise ones quality, ones goodness and therefore always remain in motion, was absolutely new in human history. Socrates was the first to formulate this kind of thought. He requested that belief in accepted authorities (parents, religion, culture...) be examined and in ones dealings with them to listen only to ones own thinking. He also made it clear that this thinking could only be learnt through discussion with others. Dialogue is the learning arena in which conversational partners can shake each other up so that the light of consciousness and deliberation awakens.

Socrates paid for this position with his life. Not everyone who he shook awake was happy about it. For some, their reputation as persons of knowledge was more important than setting themselves upon the path of questioning and searching thought. Socrates made enemies. On top that, the young men of Athens began to copy him and try to question their parents' and the accepted authorities' opinions and expose them publicly. He was finally accused of seducing the youth and establishing false gods. Although he could have fled, he submitted to the law and accepted the death sentence.

### ***What Socrates means for mediators***

The practice of inquiring into consciousness, as Socrates began it, can give valuable stimulus for training in mediation and above all in working with disputes. This is because, in the end, mediation is about "examining" viewpoints, opinions and convictions and "awakening" out of fixed beliefs, thoughts, feelings and wants. The more it works, to awaken the "light of consciousness and deliberation", the better the parties in the dispute are able to find a shared solution.

## **Martin Buber and the liminal space of dialogue**

Martin Buber was born in Vienna in 1878 into a wealthy Jewish family. When he was three years old, his mother, abandoned the family without warning and left the child waiting for her to return. It didn't happen. Martin Buber later realised that this experience was the root of his lifelong urge to understand human encounters. After extensive studies he became a successful writer, and later Professor of Religious Philosophy in Frankfurt. In 1923 he published "You and I" (Ich und Du), a book which today still counts as a standard work in dialogue philosophy. This, together with his later writings about dialogue, influenced above all humanistic psychotherapy and also subsequently part of the foundations of mediation.



Buber wanted to point out an area of the humane, which is not normally noticed, the fostering of which he saw as central to human survival. He called this dimension the "that between people", or "the between". What he meant by this was that which makes us human: the direct encounter of person-to-person, language, logos as the sphere of understanding, love, etc., and he described dialogue as the unfolding of this "between". Buber named three factors which influence whether this "between", with all its qualities, blossoms in a discussion or withers away:

### **1. Total mutuality from the partner**

The more the partners in discussion are independent individuals and the more they are able to have some distance from themselves, while being present in themselves and able to "collect from within their centre", then the stronger their presence is in the relationship. Buber also spoke here about the "geeinten Ich" (the "united I"), which from its centre, comes out in the relationship with the other. When two people confront each other in this manner, then it depends on whether they are able to recognise each other in their full presence. They must also abstain from any behaviour that would make the other material for their own purpose. This means no dominance, no pressure, no power plays, but both saying "yes" from within themselves to the relationship. If this "mutually being present as two" is successful, then a powerful force field develops between the people, "the between".

### **2. Open directness in the relationship**

When someone does not honestly in a situation say what they think, feel or want, but instead behaves as they would like others to see them, then strategies of deception rule the contact. If, in contrast, the individuals open up honestly to each other, then the special space Buber calls the "between" unfolds. Therefore, for Buber, lies in the form of pseudo-wants threatens the "between people" at its core. Buber is not of the

opinion that one should say all ones views and everything one thinks. It depends if I am asked or not!

### 3. I-you-encounter

I can look at other people as interesting objects for observation, or as material that can in some way be useful to me. Buber describes this form of contact as a “it/I relationship”, in which I make the other into an object to be used for my own ends. In opposition to this is the “you/I relationship”, in which I turn my whole self towards the other – and in which I turn with my whole self towards the other’s centre. This you/I encounter only happens in moments of enhanced consciousness, when what Buber calls “relationship power” is updated. And this encounter is only then in the “now”, as this updating happens. Buber described some elements of the me/you relationship in more detail:

- *Confirmation*: That I perceive, say yes to and confirm the other as they are, even when, in this moment, they are my enemy. That I also see and acknowledge the other’s potential for development.
- *Concrete imagination*: That I can imagine and also, in my own body, feel what the other thinks, feels and wants. That at the same time, I can visualise the entirety and uniqueness of the other, from their centre, from their dynamic middle point.
- *Circumfession*: When, through empathy and imagination, I can visualise the Being of the other, then I can lose myself in the other. Completeness is when I can shift myself into the other while not losing my own centeredness. For Buber, the relationship of dialogue is characterised by being able to be present with my own thoughts, feelings and wants, as well as by those of the partner in dialogue.
- *Developing closeness and personal visualisation*: That I allow myself to be touched in my own centre through the other’s dynamic middle point (in the “heart of hearts”). This means that I experience the other’s personal visualisation as an act of developing closeness.

Martin Buber did not want to write philosophy, but rather in philosophical language indicate the reality of the “between” so that it could also be experienced by readers. The difficulties in understanding lie, in my opinion, in that the “between” cannot be experienced with an egocentric consciousness. This is because the “between” is a field and in the moment of experiencing it I am a part of this field. My habitual I, is the I of the it/I relationship. For the field-like experience of the you/I relationship another I emerges, one which is not only involved with itself, but also lets the other mark it, without losing itself in the process. This I is, for example, present in the mature form of love.

#### ***What Martin Buber means for mediators***

When examining Martin Buber’s ideas, it is possible to look at and deepen the image of humanity within mediation. His description of the encounter is profounder than the concept of empathy, acceptance and change of perspective. Awakening to the reality of the “between” opens completely new possibilities of perception and intervention in mediation. Because when actual reality comes between me and the clients, as well as between the clients themselves, then I must, for example, learn to see my own actions no longer as only relevant to me or to the clients, but rather as part of the whole field.

## **David Bohm and investigation through dialogue in the group**

Dialogue as a modern method in management and consultancy goes back to David Bohm (1917-1992). Bohm was born in Pennsylvania, USA. He studied physics and later, as a professor, he published several standard works in quantum theory. Einstein said of him, that he was the only one who could get beyond quantum theory. As a physicist he developed the theory of “implicit order”, which says that an implicit, “enfolded” order underlies the physical world. Bohm, as a scientist who accepted no boundaries, was concerned about the state of our world: wars, famines, the increasing tension between rich and poor, the impending environmental climate change etc. and attributed it to the western culture of thought. He maintained that one of the main problems of our time was fragmented thinking, which broke the unity of something into parts and then investigated these separate parts. He say this as a problem because the unity and completeness which exists in experience is then torn apart. Divisions, Egoism, conflicting value and economic systems are the results of this kind of thinking. He developed a practice of dialogue, the point of which was to understand the roots of this fragmented thinking and to create new forms of shared thought.



Dialogue in Bohm’s sense tries to create a free space in which the exploration of human behaviour, speech, thought and feelings is central. To this end from 15, up to a maximum of 40 people meet regularly over a long period of time. They sit in a circle. There is no previously agreed upon topic and the dialogue moderator’s roll is only important until the group can organise itself. The topic clarifies itself during the discussion. When trust has developed within the group, the different views and values systems and concepts behind them quickly become clear. They crash into each other. The exploration of these values systems, and the emotions, convictions etc. connected with them, is then central to the dialogue. This process does not, however, progress in a straight line. There can be phases where frustration and arguments arise. If the participants manage to overcome identifying with emotions and perspectives and to explore the background which leads to these feelings, then it is possible to see the underlying connections.

The central ability which should be developed through dialogue is an attentiveness, which in a relaxed way, without judging and as clearly as possible, recognises what happens within myself, within the others and between us in the group. Truthfulness and overcoming self-deception are therefore essential moments for this process.

When judgements, feelings or impulses to action arise, it is about keeping them “in limbo”, meaning they should unfold within the soul so that I can recognise them. I give them my full attention, but I do not completely identify with them, and so do not, for example, attack anyone in an emotional manner. Instead I observe and explore precisely and discriminatingly what is in myself: thoughts, physical sensations, emotions, memories etc. Through this a space for self-perception and self-reflection emerges, in which not only the individual and collective cultural patterns but also formative experiences of the internal observer can become conscious. Bohm called this ability for open and unbounded attentiveness the true intelligence of humanity and differentiated it from the dissected thought which is bound to language.

When this keeping “in limbo” and exploring through dialogue takes place then the individuals talk honestly about their experiences and help each other to better understand the unconscious processes that lead to judgement, feelings and impulses for action. Through this deepening of trust, honesty and openness in the dialogue group, a situation develops which is no longer about being right or defending opinions. Instead opposing opinions can be present, and even the roots of those opinions can be examined together. When in this sense no speaker and no content is excluded anymore, a special form of shared experience develops: everyone takes part in this collective process of understanding; logos flows through the group. An intelligent, collective connection develops the base of which is a collectively shared consciousness.

David Bohm was convinced the experiences in such a dialogue group would naturally influence behaviour in everyday life. The ability to really hear deepens, self-reflection and self-direction improve and the sensitivity and consciousness of internal and external processes grow. David Bohm led dialogue seminars in which Peter Senge and other scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) took part. A research project developed out of this in 1992 at MIT under the leadership of William Isaac, in which dialogue was practiced in companies with a great deal of success.

### ***What David Bohm means for mediators***

Similarly to David Bohm’s dialogue exploration, mediation is also about making the processes and structures that underlie the superficial positions in the conflict conscious and able to be spoken about. For this mediators must enable the conflicting parties to access deeper layers of their being. The self-discovery within a dialogue group can be a good opportunity to acquire knowledge and confidence in traversing this field. Above all, sensitivity and attentiveness for psychic and social processes are central abilities for helping the conflicting parties to overcome their conflict attitude and become able to (again) engage in dialogue.

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