



Bohm

On Dialogue

On Dialogue

“People say, ‘All we really need is love.’ If there were universal love, all would go well. But we don’t appear to have it. So we have to find a way that works.”

David Bohm, On Dialogue

“One of my scientific ‘gurus’.”

The Dalai Lama

“Underlying many of the problems of humanity is our inability to even talk about our problems. *On Dialogue* offers tools that facilitate a true exchange of ideas between people.”

Paavo Pylkkänen

“An openness to the irreducible nature of the whole in both science and art summarizes the timeless philosophical stance of David Bohm. The delight to have *On Creativity* and *On Dialogue* made into Routledge Classics has special relevance to our era of fracture, contention, and public duplicity.”

Lynn Margulis, University of Massachusetts-Amherst



Routledge Classics contains the very best of Routledge publishing over the past century or so, books that have, by popular consent, become established as classics in their field. Drawing on a fantastic heritage of innovative writing published by Routledge and its associated imprints, this series makes available in attractive, affordable form some of the most important works of modern times.

For a complete list of titles visit
www.routledgeclassics.com

David
Bohm

On Dialogue

With a new preface by Peter M. Senge

Edited by Lee Nichol



London and New York

First published 1996
by Routledge

First published in Routledge Classics 2004
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1996 Saral Bohm, for the original material by David Bohm; Lee Nichol
for selection and editorial matter.

Preface to Routledge Classics edition © 2004 Peter M. Senge

Typeset in Joanna by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or
utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now
known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in
any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing
from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN10: 0-415-33641-4

ISBN13: 978-0-415-33641-3

CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION	vii
FOREWORD	xv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xxix
1 On Communication	1
2 On Dialogue	6
3 The Nature of Collective Thought	55
4 The Problem and the Paradox	70
5 The Observer and the Observed	79
6 Suspension, the Body, and Proprioception	83
7 Participatory Thought and the Unlimited	96
BIBLIOGRAPHY	110
INDEX	111

PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

Re-reading today David Bohm's essay "On Dialogue" is, for me, like unwrapping a precious present. So, it was not only an honor but a wonderful opportunity to be asked to write a preface to this new edition of Bohm's classic article.

I first met David and Saral Bohm at MIT in mid-1989, during the time period when the talks that were the basis for this essay were being given. We talked for several hours about dialogue. I have often wished that the meeting had been recorded, because I have the distinct recollection of hearing so much that made deep sense and knowing that I would remember little. The fine grains of David's perceptions could not be held by the coarse weave of my mind. My feeling is that much of what was elusive to me then is laid out here and hopefully many of us are now more prepared for it.

Since that meeting, there have been many serious efforts to practice dialogue in complex settings,¹ and the idea has

¹ The research done through MIT and in the SoL network is presented in W. Isaacs (1999) *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life*, New York: Currency.

gained considerable cachet. Meetings of many sorts are billed as dialogues: “stakeholder dialogues,” “cross-sector dialogues,” “civic dialogues.” For example, when Kofi Annan and his colleagues established the UN Global Compact to foster collaboration among corporations to elevate social, environmental, and labor standards around the world, one key element was “policy dialogue” encouraging corporate, labor and civil society organizations “to pursue innovative solutions to complex problems.”² Within many organizations, serious efforts have been made to integrate dialogue practices into day-to-day operations – for example, simple practices like “check-ins” and “check-outs:” hearing, in turn, each person’s thoughts and feelings in a group at the outset or closing of meetings. In one of the world’s largest multinational corporations, a senior vice president has hosted “agenda-less” dialogue meetings monthly for several years, as a way of signaling the need to nurture “collective leadership.”

All of this signals a growing recognition that the complex problems our organizations and societies face demand a deeper listening and a more open communication than has been the norm. “Win-lose” politics and hierarchical authority are simply not adequate for confronting global climate change, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the dilemmas of genetic technology. People “speaking at one another” will not foster the mutual understanding, shared aspirations, and networks of collaborative action needed. Alternatives must be found, both within and among institutions of all sorts.

This growing interest in dialogue is why the re-publication of this talk is so timely – especially if it leads to broader appreciation of what dialogue meant to Bohm and of what sorts of changes it might catalyze. For him dialogue was not just a better way to have more productive conversations, although he was supportive of this aim. It was not just a way to foster reflective-

² See www.globalcompact.org

ness, which he also endorsed. It certainly was not just a method for improving the effectiveness of businesses and other mainstream organizations, a goal about which he was deeply ambivalent, because he knew that helping such organizations become more effective often meant accelerating established and problematic patterns of global industrial development.

For Bohm, the “tacit ground” is what holds a society together, and here is where the changes he hoped to encourage must unfold. “Thought is emerging from the tacit ground,” he says, “and any fundamental change in thought will come from the tacit ground.” Repeatedly, he stresses that a society that works requires a “coherent” tacit ground, and that this is missing today. “Shared meaning is really the cement that holds society together, and you could say that the present society has very poor quality cement . . . The society at large has a very incoherent set of meanings. In fact, this set of ‘shared meanings’ is so incoherent that it is hard to say that they have any real meaning at all.”

Appreciating what real dialogue was about for Bohm starts with appreciating what he meant by incoherence. This is an unusual term for a social critic, even less for a social activist, but a natural one for a physicist. A laser generates extraordinary energy because of the coherence of the light, which may require no more generating power than an “incoherent” light bulb. But, what does this analogy mean in the social world?

In his talk, Bohm often returns to the challenge in dialogue of simply allowing multiple points of view to be. Our habits are so strong to defend our view, to agree with views that correspond with our own, and to disagree with those that differ, that simply allowing diverse views to stand can be almost impossibly difficult. “The thing that mostly gets in the way of dialogue,” he says, “is holding to assumptions and opinions, and defending them.” This instinct to judge and defend, embedded in the self-defense mechanisms of our biological heritage, is the source of incoherence.

Our personal meaning starts to become incoherent when it becomes fixed. The incoherence increases when past meaning is imposed on present situations. As this continues, yesterday's meaning becomes today's dogma, often losing much of its original meaningfulness in the process. When this happens collectively, societies become governed by shadows, hollowed out myths from the past applied as inviolate truths for the present. This leads to incoherence on a large scale, patterns of thinking and acting that separate people from one another and from the larger reality in which they are attempting to live.

Unchecked incoherence grows into absurdity. Bohm tells a story about a psychiatrist working with a disturbed young girl who refused to talk to anyone, until she finally exploded, telling him she would not talk to him "because I hate you." When he asked her how long she would continue to hate him, she said "forever." When he asked her "how long will you hate me forever?" the absurdity of her attitude suddenly hit her and she burst out laughing and the anger was broken. But absurdity widely shared by a culture may be less easy to see – like pretending that economies can continue to grow forever in material production (and waste) on a finite planet, or that unilateral approaches can achieve national security in a world with increasingly deadly and accessible weapons technologies, or that the pace of life can be speeded up indefinitely – as one teenager put it, "people running faster and faster to get to where no one wants to go."

Put differently, the core problem, Bohm realized, is that we do not know how to live together in a changing world. We only know how to live based on truths from the past, which today inevitably results in one group attempting to impose their truths on another. It is easy for us to see this in others – for example, in fanatical "terrorists", radical fundamentalists aimed at overthrowing modern democratic societies. But, how is this different from "democratic fundamentalists" seeking to impose their truth as the one right way to live? Bohm realized that defending core

beliefs and the resulting incoherence was endemic in the modern world. He tells a poignant story about Einstein and Bohr, two men who shared a warm friendship early in their lives but who could not speak with one another in their later years, “because they had nothing to talk about. They couldn’t share any meaning, because each one felt his meaning was true.” If such entrenchment can afflict two such brilliant minds, who among us is immune?

Conversely, collective coherent ways of thinking and acting only emerge when there is truly a flow of meaning, which starts with allowing many views, an approach that defensiveness precludes. But coherence is a way of living rather than a fixed state, and Bohm knew very well the challenge it represented.

First, as a scientist, Bohm appreciated that society’s incoherence cannot be divorced from the very Western scientific rationalism that we hold sacrosanct in the modern world. Although most scientists would decry the very notion of fundamentalism, the way the scientific establishment functions in the larger society belies scientists’ espoused openness. “In a way,” Bohm says, “science has become the religion of the modern age. It plays the role that religion used to play of giving us truth.” This intellectual fundamentalism is largely invisible to us because it is embedded deeply in cultural assumptions that most members of modern society share and which we do not know how to challenge. From our earliest schooling, we learn of scientists as the people who tell us “how things really work.” The problem, for Bohm, stems from the way contemporary science “is predicated on the concept . . . [of] arriving at . . . a unique truth. The idea of dialogue is thereby in some way foreign to the current structure of science, as it is with religion.” Bohm knew that the quest for “unique truth” carries the potential to divide rather than connect people. As Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana says, “when one human being tells another human what is ‘real,’ what they are actually doing is making a demand for obedience. They are asserting that they have a privileged view of reality.”

For Bohm, dialogue offered a different path to truth, indeed a different notion of truth. “We will never come to truth unless the overall meaning is coherent,” he says. Out of creating a larger field of more coherent shared meaning, truly new and penetrating understandings may emerge, often unexpectedly. “Truth does not emerge from opinions,” says Bohm, “it must emerge from something else – perhaps from a freer movement of this tacit mind.” He continues, “we have to get meanings coherent if we are to perceive truth, or to take part in truth.”

This odd phrase, “take part in truth,” points to, what seems to me, Bohm’s second foundational idea: what it means to understand wholes. Reductionist science has great power in understanding isolated things, and in applying this knowledge to create new things like new technologies. But its efficacy hinges on its being able to fragment or isolate its subject matter. It fails and may become actively dysfunctional when confronted by wholes, by the need to understand and take effective action in a highly interdependent context. This is why the modern world is full of increasingly stunning technological advances and an increasing inability to live together.

The fundamental problem here, according to Bohm, is that “the whole is too much. There is no way by which thought can hold the whole, because thought only abstracts; it limits and defines.” This idea of abstracting versus appreciating wholes was conveyed beautifully by Hebrew existentialist philosopher Martin Buber, in speaking of what it means to take in the whole of a person, to see a person as “a Thou.”³

If I face a human being as my Thou, . . . he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things . . . Thus human being is not a He or She, bounded from every other He or She, . . . but

³ M. Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Scribner Classics, Simon & Schuster, New York: 2000, 23–4.

with no neighbor, and whole in himself, he is Thou and fills the heavens.

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor the statue of lines, but these must be tugged and dragged till their unity has been scattered into these many pieces, so with the man (*mensch*) to whom I say Thou. I can take out from him the color of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time he ceases to be Thou.

Bohm believed that the alternative way toward understanding a whole arises through participation rather than abstraction. “A different kind of consciousness is possible among us, a *participatory consciousness*.” In a genuine dialogue, “each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it.” This is not necessarily pleasant, as Bohm warns. The present state of the systems in which we live almost inevitably contains great pain as well as great beauty, deep anger as well as unconditional love. If we separate ourselves from whatever is within the whole, we cannot take part in it – and we return to abstracting, judging and defending: “I am not like that person,” or “he is bad and I am good,” or “she does not see what is happening and I do.”

Herein lies the first gateway to generating dialogue and moving toward a more coherent tacit ground. To take part in truth we must see our part in it. There are no “good guys” and “bad guys” separate from ourselves. As members of modern society, we all participate in creating the forces that give rise to what exists, both what we value and what we abhor. The poet Maya Angelou tells a story of her reconciliation and awakening. As a teenager, a member of her extended family raped her. Ultimately, coming to terms with this meant seeing that the emotions and violence that drove her rapist existed within her as well. When she tells this story, Angelou often ends by quoting

Terence Afar, an African brought to ancient Rome as a slave and then eventually freed, “I am a human being. Nothing that is human is foreign to me.” This is what it means to take part in truth.

In short, David Bohm’s basic aim was a different and more viable way of living together. He knew that, in a world of growing interdependence, people who cannot do this are headed inevitably toward escalating conflict. As a physicist, his life had been dedicated to understanding a participatory universe where meaning is continually unfolding. As a human being, he believed that the present crisis offered a unique opportunity to bring that same sort of understanding into the center of human affairs.

It is easy to dismiss Bohm as a romantic idealist – by his own assessment, he envisioned “a kind of culture which, as far as I can tell, has never really existed . . . (except perhaps) very long ago.” But my experiences over the past fifteen years with both the possibility and challenge of dialogue leads me to see him quite differently. I would call David Bohm an extreme realist. He knew that no society has ever faced the sort of global predicament we face, and that we are not likely to muddle through without radical changes in our way of being – together.

PETER M. SENGE
SOL (SOCIETY FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING) AND MIT
JANUARY 13, 2004

FOREWORD

On Dialogue is the most comprehensive documentation to date of the process David Bohm referred to simply as “dialogue.” This revised and expanded edition of the original booklet of the same name is intended to serve both as a practical working manual for those interested in engaging in dialogue, as well as a theoretical foundation for those interested in probing into the deeper implications of Bohm’s dialogical world view. While the exercise of dialogue is as old as civilization itself, in recent times a profusion of practices, techniques, and definitions has arisen around the term “dialogue.” Though none of these approaches can lay claim to being the “correct” view, it is indeed possible to distinguish the various views, and to clarify what is intended by each. To this end, the current edition of *On Dialogue* illuminates the underlying meaning, purpose, and uniqueness of David Bohm’s work in this field.

As conceived by Bohm, dialogue is a multi-faceted process, looking well beyond typical notions of conversational parlance and exchange. It is a process which explores an unusually wide

range of human experience: our closely held values; the nature and intensity of emotions; the patterns of our thought processes; the function of memory; the import of inherited cultural myths; and the manner in which our neurophysiology structures moment-to-moment experience. Perhaps most importantly, dialogue explores the manner in which thought – viewed by Bohm as an inherently limited medium, rather than an objective representation of reality – is generated and sustained at the collective level. Such an inquiry necessarily calls into question deeply held assumptions regarding culture, meaning, and identity. In its deepest sense, then, dialogue is an invitation to test the viability of traditional definitions of what it means to be human, and collectively to explore the prospect of an enhanced humanity.

Throughout his career as a theoretical physicist, Bohm made note of the fact that, in spite of claims to pursue “truth,” scientific endeavor was often infected with personal ambition, a rigid defense of theory, and the weight of tradition – all at the expense of creative participation toward the common goals of science. Based in part on such observations, he frequently remarked that the general lot of mankind was caught in a similar web of contradictory intentions and actions. These contradictions, he felt, lead not only to bad science, but to all variety of social and personal fragmentation. In Bohm’s view, such fragmentation cuts across cultural and geographical distinctions, pervading the whole of humanity to such an extent that we have become fundamentally acclimated to it.

To illustrate the significance of fragmentation, Bohm often used the example of a watch that has been smashed into random pieces. These pieces are quite different from the parts that have gone into the making of the watch. The parts have an integral relationship to one another, resulting in a functional whole. The fragments, on the other hand, have no essential relationship. Similarly, the generic thought processes of humanity incline toward perceiving the world in a fragmentary way, “breaking

things up which are not really separate.” Such perception, says Bohm, necessarily results in a world of nations, economies, religions, value systems, and “selves” that are fundamentally at odds with one another, despite topically successful attempts to impose social order. One primary intent of Bohm’s dialogue, then, is to shed light on the activity of this fragmentation – not only as theoretical analysis, but also as a concrete, experiential process.

On its surface, dialogue is a relatively straightforward activity. A group of fifteen to forty people (Bohm’s suggestions regarding numbers varied) voluntarily convene in a circle. After some initial clarification as to the nature of the process, the group is faced with how to proceed. As the group has convened with no preset agenda, settling into an agreeable topic (or topics) may take some time, and generate some frustration. In these early stages, a facilitator is useful, but the facilitator role should be relinquished as quickly as possible, leaving the group to chart its own course. Experience has shown that if such a group continues to meet regularly, social conventions begin to wear thin, and the content of sub-cultural differences begins to assert itself, regardless of the topic *du jour*. This emergent friction between contrasting values is at the heart of dialogue, in that it allows the participants to notice the assumptions that are active in the group, including one’s own personal assumptions. Recognizing the power of these assumptions and attending to their “virus-like” nature may lead to a new understanding of the fragmentary and self-destructive nature of many of our thought processes. With such understanding, defensive posturing can diminish, and a quality of natural warmth and fellowship can infuse the group.

If this all sounds a bit too pat, a bit too formulaic, it is. While the accumulated experience of many people in many different parts of the world shows that this unfolding can in fact occur, it is by no means a guaranteed result. The movement of a dialogue group is rarely from point A to point B. Rather, the movement is

more typically recursive, with unexpected dynamic shifts following periods of frustration, boredom, and agitation, in a perpetual cycle. Even then, the creative potential of the dialogue – its capacity to reveal the deeper structures of consciousness depends upon sustained, serious application by the participants themselves. In the dialogue, a very considerable degree of attention is required to keep track of the subtle implications of one's own assumptive/reactive tendencies, while also sensing similar patterns in the group as a whole. Bohm emphasized that such attention, or awareness, is not a matter of accumulated knowledge or technique, nor does it have the goal of "correcting" what may emerge in the dialogue. Rather, it is more of the nature of relaxed, nonjudgmental curiosity, its primary activity being to see things as freshly and clearly as possible. The nurturing of such attention, often bypassed in more utilitarian versions of dialogue, is a central element in Bohm's approach to the process.

Concerns about the seemingly intractable incoherence of human thought led Bohm to engage in explorations with various individuals who entertained similar views. Prominent among these was the Indian educator and philosopher, J. Krishnamurti. Two themes in particular were of shared concern, and emerged as additional components in Bohm's view of dialogue: the prospect that the problems of thought are fundamentally collective, rather than individual; and the paradox of "the observer and the observed," which implies that traditional methods of introspection and self-improvement are inadequate for comprehending the true nature of the mind.

Bohm also inquired into the nature of communication and dialogue with the English psychiatrist, Dr Patrick de Mare. Among the many ideas de Mare had been exploring in group contexts, two were to figure prominently in Bohm's evolving conception of dialogue. The notion of "impersonal fellowship" suggests that authentic trust and openness can emerge in a group context, without its members having shared extensive personal

history. In addition, the theory of the “microculture” proposes that a sampling of an entire culture can exist in a group of twenty or more people, thereby charging it with multiple views and value systems.

At the same time that Bohm was involved in these ongoing explorations, he traveled throughout Europe and North America with his wife Saral, conducting seminars on topics both scientific and philosophical. One such seminar, in the spring of 1984 in Mickleton, England, provided an opening for the emergence of two further aspects of dialogue – the notion of shared meaning within a group, and the absence of a preestablished purpose or agenda. Bohm described the significance of the seminar in the following way.

The weekend began with the expectation that there would be a series of lectures and informative discussions with emphasis on content. It gradually emerged that something more important was actually involved – the awakening of the process of dialogue itself as a free flow of meaning among all the participants. In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions, which they were tending to defend, but later it became clear that to maintain the feeling of friendship in the group was much more important than to maintain any position. Such friendship has an impersonal quality in the sense that its establishment does not depend on close personal relationship between participants. A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of the dialogue. People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change. In this development the group has no pre-established purpose, though at each moment a purpose which is free to change may reveal itself. The group thus begins

to engage in a new dynamic relationship in which no speaker is excluded, and in which no particular content is excluded. Thus far we have only begun to explore the possibilities of dialogue in the sense indicated here, but going further along these lines would open up the possibility of transforming not only the relationship between people, but even more, the very nature of consciousness in which these relationships arise.¹

We find here a pivotal definition: dialogue is aimed at the understanding of consciousness *per se*, as well as exploring the problematic nature of day-to-day relationship and communication. This definition provides a foundation, a reference point if you will, for the key components of dialogue: shared meaning; the nature of collective thought; the pervasiveness of fragmentation; the function of awareness; the microcultural context; undirected inquiry; impersonal fellowship; and the paradox of the observer and the observed. The breadth of view indicated by these various elements hints at the radical nature of Bohm's vision of dialogue. As Bohm himself emphasized, however, dialogue is a process of direct, face-to-face encounter, not to be confused with endless theorizing and speculation. In a time of accelerating abstractions and seamless digital representations, it is this insistence on facing the inconvenient messiness of daily, corporeal experience that is perhaps most radical of all.

David Bohm continued to refine his notions of dialogue until his death in 1992, bringing forth new material in his last years. In addition, a considerable body of his work exists, dating back as far as 1970, which has direct bearing on the development of dialogue and its theoretical underpinnings. Selections from these materials are brought together in this volume for the first time, providing an extended survey of Bohm's work in the field.

¹ David Bohm (1987) *Unfolding Meaning*, London: Routledge, p. 175.

The material derives from two distinct contexts. The first and fourth chapters, “On Communication” and “The Problem and the Paradox,” are specific essays authored by Bohm in 1970 and 1971 respectively. Both were originally published in the *Bulletin of the Krishnamurti Foundation Trust of England*. The remainder of the material is drawn primarily from seminars and small group meetings held in Ojai, California between 1977 and 1992. The book, then, is a combination of extemporaneous presentation and intentional, considered essays. Its intent is to provide a general introduction to dialogue, and to offer reference chapters that correspond with some of the central themes in the theory of dialogue. Thus, the reader may use the second chapter, “On Dialogue,” as a primer, while referring to other chapters for deeper exploration of issues addressed only topically in the dialogue essay.

The first chapter, “On Communication,” offers insight into Bohm’s early formulations of the meaning of dialogue, particularly the manner in which sensitivity to “similarity and difference” enters the work of the scientist, the artist, and communication at the day-to-day level. The essay is prescient in its treatment of “listening,” an issue that is frequently misunderstood in the process of dialogue. “Listening” in dialogue is often taken to mean thorough, careful, empathic sensitivity to the words and meanings of group members. While this is indeed a part of dialogue, Bohm here outlines a listening of a different order, a listening in which the very mis-perception of one’s spoken intent can lead to new meaning that is created on the spot. Grasping this point is essential for an understanding of what Bohm eventually referred to as the “flow of meaning” in dialogue.

“On Dialogue,” the second chapter, provides a comprehensive overview and rationale of the dialogue process, with practical and procedural matters being addressed in detail. Certain fundamentals of dialogue – suspension, sensitivity, the impulse of “necessity” – are introduced and explained. In addition, the

difficulties that may emerge in a dialogue are surveyed, and suggestions offered as to how these difficulties can actually be used to deepen understanding of the process itself. Bohm also presents what he calls the “vision of dialogue” – the prospect that our tendency to fall prey to mindless group activity can be transformed to intelligent collective fellowship, if only we will face the actual nature of the problems that exist between us.

In “The Nature of Collective Thought,” Bohm proposes that a “pool of knowledge” – both tacit and overt – has accumulated throughout human evolution. It is this pool of knowledge, says Bohm, that gives rise to much of our perception of the world, the meanings we assign to events, and indeed our very sense of individuality. Such knowledge, or thought, moves independent of any individual, or even any particular culture – very much like a virus. From this perspective, our attempts to solve our problems through highly personalized analysis, or by attributing malignant qualities to “other” groups or individuals, are of limited validity. What is called for, says Bohm, is to begin to attend to the movement of thought in a new way, to look in places we have previously ignored. Using the analogy of a river that is being perpetually polluted at its source, Bohm points out that removing the pollution “downstream” cannot really solve the problem. The real solution lies in addressing what is generating the pollution at the source.

To illustrate one aspect of this generative pollution of thought, Bohm explores the manner in which perceptual input is fused with memory to produce *representations* that guide us in our moment-to-moment experience. The construction of these representations, which is both natural and necessary, is nonetheless a process that lies at the heart of collective incoherence. According to Bohm, the essential difficulty here is that we automatically assume that our representations are *true pictures of reality*, rather than relative guides for action that are based on reflexive, unexamined memories. Once we have assumed that the repre-

sentations are fundamentally true, they “present” themselves as reality, and we have no option but to act accordingly. What is suggested is not that we attempt to alter the process of representation (which may be impossible), but that we carefully attend to the fact that any given representation – instinctively perceived as “reality” – may be somewhat less than real, or true. From such a perspective we may be able to engage a quality of reflective intelligence – a kind of discernment that enables us to perceive and dispense with fundamentally false representations, and become more exacting in the formation of new ones. Perhaps the greatest challenge, says Bohm, is to attend to those representations which are tacitly formed and upheld at the collective level.

In “The Problem and the Paradox,” Bohm points out that when operating in the practical or technical realm, we typically proceed by defining a problem we wish to deal with, then systematically apply a solution. But in the realm of relationship, whether inwardly or externally, the posing of a “problem” to be solved creates a fundamentally contradictory structure. Unlike practical problems, where the “thing” to be solved has independence from us (e.g., improving the design of ocean-going vessels), psychological difficulties have no such independence. If I realize that I am susceptible to flattery, and pose this as a problem to be solved, I have made an internal distinction between “myself” and “susceptibility to flattery” which in fact does not exist. Inwardly, I then seem to consist of at least two parts: an urge to believe the flattery, and an urge not to believe the flattery. I am thus proceeding on the basis of a contradiction, which will result in a cycle of confused attempts to “solve” a “problem” whose nature is quite unlike that of a technical problem. Bohm suggests that what is occurring is in fact a *paradox*, not a problem. As a paradox has no discernible solution, a new approach is required, namely, sustained attention to the paradox itself, rather than a determined attempt to eradicate the “problem.” From Bohm’s perspective, the confusion between

problem and paradox operates at all levels of society, from the individual to the global.

“The Observer and the Observed” continues the inquiry into the paradoxical nature of inner experience. Specifically, Bohm addresses the phenomenon of a “central entity,” a “self,” which observes and acts upon itself. For example, if I see that I am angry, then “I” may try to alter “my anger.” At this point, a distinction has occurred: there is the observer – “I,” and the observed – “anger.” Bohm suggests that this observer is primarily a movement of assumptions and experiences – including anger – but is attributed the status of “entity” through habit, lack of attention, and cultural consensus. This sense of an inner entity carries extremely high value; consequently, a protective mechanism is set in place that allows the “observer” to look both inwardly and outwardly at all variety of “problems,” but does not allow sustained consideration of the nature of the observer itself. This limitation on the mind’s scope of activity is seen to be yet another factor in the generic incoherence of thought.

“Suspension, the Body, and Proprioception” is an exploration of various aspects of awareness that have the potential to cut through the confusion produced by the weight of collective opinion, ill-founded representations, and the illusion of the observer and the observed. Bohm suggests that both on one’s own and in the context of a dialogue, it is possible to “suspend” assumptions. For example, if you feel that someone is an idiot, to suspend you would (a) refrain from saying so outwardly and (b) refrain from telling yourself you should not think such things. In this way, the effects of the thought, “You are an idiot” (agitation, anger, resentment) are free to run their course, but in a way that allows them to simply be seen, rather than fully identified with. In other words, suspending an assumption or reaction means neither repressing it nor following through on it, but fully attending to it.

In the activity of suspension, the role of the body is of

central importance. If a strong impulse is suspended, it will inevitably manifest physically – increased blood pressure, adrenalin, muscular tension, and so on. Likewise, a spectrum of emotions will emerge. In Bohm's view, these components – thoughts, emotions, bodily reactions – are in fact an unbroken whole. However, they sustain one another by appearing to be different – a thought here, a pain in the neck there, and an observer somehow struggling to manage it all. Underlying this activity is a further assumption that the entire difficulty is caused by something “other,” something “out there.”

Bohm then suggests that “proprioception of thought” may be capable of directly penetrating this cycle of confusion. Physiologically, proprioception provides the body with immediate feedback about its own activity. One can walk up and down steps, for example, without having to consciously direct the body's movement. Further, one can make clear distinctions between what originates within one's body, and what has come from outside. If you move your own arm, you do not have the mistaken impression that someone else has moved it for you. Currently, however, we lack such immediate feedback about the movement of thought. Often, therefore, we perceive a difficulty to originate outside ourselves, when in fact it is primarily a construction of thought. Bohm proposes that, with suspension as a basis, the movement of thought can become proprioceptive, much as the body does.

“Participatory Thought and the Unlimited” inquires into the relationship between what Bohm refers to as “literal thought” and “participatory thought.” Literal thought is practical and result-oriented, its aim being to form discrete, unequivocal pictures of things “just as they are.” Scientific and technical thought are contemporary variants of literal thought.

Bohm suggests that while literal thought has been predominant since the inception of civilization, a more archaic form of perception, formed over the whole of human evolution, remains

latent – and at times active – in the structure of our consciousness. This he refers to as “participatory thought,” a mode of thought in which discrete boundaries are sensed as permeable, objects have an underlying relationship with one another, and the movement of the perceptible world is sensed as participating in some vital essence. Even today, says Bohm, many tribal cultures maintain aspects of participatory thought.

While acknowledging that such thought is susceptible to projection and error, Bohm nonetheless maintains that at its core, participatory thought is capable of perceiving strata of relationships that are generally inaccessible from a “literal” perspective. Indeed, Bohm suggests that the perspective of participatory thought is not unlike his own vision of the *implicate order*, in which the phenomena of the manifest world are understood as temporary aspects of the movement of a deeper natural order, in a process of perpetual “enfolding” and “unfolding.” The essential point to consider, says Bohm, is that both literal thought and participatory thought have virtues and limitations. He makes an appeal for a renewed inquiry into the proper relationship between the two, suggesting that dialogue is uniquely suited to such an exploration.

Finally, Bohm raises doubts as to whether any form of thought can apprehend what he refers to as the “unlimited.” As the very nature of thought is to select limited abstractions from the world, it can never really approach the “ground of our being” – that which is unlimited. Yet at the same time, human beings have an intrinsic need to understand and relate to the “cosmic dimension” of existence. To address this apparent disjuncture in our experience, Bohm proposes that *attention*, unlike thought, is potentially unrestricted, and therefore capable of apprehending the subtle nature of the “unlimited.”

While the language of such exploration is necessarily metaphorical and inferential, Bohm nonetheless insisted that sustained inquiry into the nature of consciousness and the “ground

of being” is essential if we are to have some prospect of bringing an end to fragmentation in the world. It was his firm belief that this fragmentation is rooted in the incoherence of our thought processes, not in immutable laws of nature. He refused to place limitations on where the inquiry into this incoherence may lead, or to draw sharp distinctions between the individual, collective, and cosmic dimensions of humanity. In this respect, dialogue – always a testing ground for the limits of assumed knowledge – offers the possibility of an entirely new order of communication and relationship with ourselves, our fellows, and the world we inhabit.

LEE NICHOL
JEMEZ SPRINGS, NEW MEXICO
NOVEMBER 1995

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editor would like to express his gratitude to Paul and Sherry Hannigan for their good humor, technical support, and commentary in the preparation of the manuscript; to Saral Bohm, Claudia Krause-Johnson, and Mary Helen Snyder for reading early drafts; to Arleta Griffor for unearthing "On Communication," and to James Brodsky and Phildea Fleming for conceiving the original booklet.

Very special thanks to Saral Bohm, Arthur Braverman, Theresa Bulla-Richards, Adrian Driscoll, David Moody, and Lynn Powers for their support at critical junctures in the effort to present David Bohm's work to the widest possible reading public.

1

ON COMMUNICATION

During the past few decades, modern technology, with radio, television, air travel, and satellites, has woven a network of communications which puts each part of the world into almost instant contact with all the other parts. Yet, in spite of this worldwide system of linkages, there is, at this very moment, a general feeling that communication is breaking down everywhere, on an unparalleled scale. People living in different nations, with different economic and political systems, are hardly able to talk to each other without fighting. And within any single nation, different social classes and economic and political groups are caught in a similar pattern of inability to understand each other. Indeed, even within each limited group, people are talking of a "generation gap," which is such that older and younger members do not communicate, except perhaps in a superficial way. Moreover, in schools and universities, students tend to feel that their teachers are overwhelming them with a flood of information which they suspect is irrelevant to actual life. And what appears on the radio and television, as well as in the newspapers

and magazines, is generally at best a collection of trivial and almost unrelated fragments, while at worst, it can often be a really harmful source of confusion and misinformation.

Because of widespread dissatisfaction with the state of affairs described above, there has been a growing feeling of concern to solve what is now commonly called "the problem of communication." But if one observes efforts to solve this problem, he will notice that different groups who are trying to do this are not actually able to listen to each other. As a result, the very attempt to improve communication leads frequently to yet more confusion, and the consequent sense of frustration inclines people ever further toward aggression and violence, rather than toward mutual understanding and trust.

If one considers the fact that communication is breaking down and that in the present context efforts to prevent this from happening generally tend to accelerate the breakdown, he may perhaps pause in his thinking, to give opportunity to ask whether the difficulty does not originate in some more subtle way that has escaped our mode of formulating what is going wrong. Is it not possible that our crude and insensitive manner of thinking about communication and talking about it is a major factor behind our inability to see what would be an intelligent action that would end the present difficulties?

It may be useful to begin to discuss this question by considering the meaning of the word "communication." This is based on the Latin *commun* and the suffix "ie" which is similar to "fie," in that it means "to make or to do." So one meaning of "to communicate" is "to make something common," i.e., to convey information or knowledge from one person to another in as accurate a way as possible. This meaning is appropriate in a wide range of contexts. Thus, one person may communicate to another a set of directions as to how to carry out a certain operation. Clearly, a great deal of our industry and technology depends on this kind of communication.

Nevertheless, this meaning does not cover all that is signified by communication. For example, consider a dialogue. In such a dialogue, when one person says something, the other person does not in general respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only similar and not identical. Thus, when the second person replies, the first person sees a *difference* between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant both to his own views and to those of the other person. And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants. Thus, in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to *make common* certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something in *common*, i.e., creating something new together.

But of course such communication can lead to the creation of something new only if people are able freely to listen to each other, without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other. Each has to be interested primarily in truth and coherence, so that he is ready to drop his old ideas and intentions, and be ready to go on to something different, when this is called for. If, however, two people merely want to convey certain ideas or points of view to each other, as if these were items of information, then they must inevitably fail to meet. For each will hear the other through the screen of his own thoughts, which he tends to maintain and defend, regardless of whether or not they are true or coherent. The result will of course be just the sort of confusion that leads to the insoluble "problem of communication" which has been pointed out and discussed earlier.

Evidently, communication in the sense described above is necessary in all aspects of life. Thus, if people are to cooperate (i.e., literally to "work together") they have to be able to create something in common, something that takes shape in their

mutual discussions and actions, rather than something that is conveyed from one person who acts as an authority to the others, who act as passive instruments of this authority.

Even in relationships with inanimate objects and with nature in general, something very like communication is involved. Consider, for example, the work of an artist. Can it properly be said that the artist is *expressing himself*, i.e., literally “pushing outward” something that is already formed inside of him? Such a description is not in fact generally accurate or adequate. Rather, what usually happens is that the first thing the artist does is only *similar* in certain ways to what he may have in mind. As in a conversation between two people, he sees the similarity and the difference, and from this perception something further emerges in his next action. Thus, something new is continually created that is common to the artist and the material on which he is working.

The scientist is engaged in a similar “dialogue” with nature (as well as with his fellow human beings). Thus, when a scientist has an idea, this is tested by observation. When it is found (as generally happens) that what is observed is only similar to what he had in mind and not identical, then from a consideration of the similarities and the differences he gets a new idea which is in turn tested. And so it goes, with the continual emergence of something new that is common to the thought of scientists and what is observed in nature. This extends onward into practical activities, which lead to the creation of new structures that are common to man and to the overall environment in which he lives.

It is clear that if we are to live in harmony with ourselves and with nature, we need to be able to communicate freely in a creative movement in which no one permanently holds to or otherwise defends his own ideas. Why then is it so difficult actually to bring about such communication?

This is a very complex and subtle question. But it may perhaps

be said that when one comes to do something (and not merely to talk about it or think about it), one tends to believe that one *already* is listening to the other person in a proper way. It seems then that the main trouble is that the other person is the one who is prejudiced and not listening. After all, it is easy for each one of us to see that other people are “blocked” about certain questions, so that without being aware of it, they are avoiding the confrontation of contradictions in certain ideas that may be extremely dear to them.

The very nature of such a “block” is, however, that it is a kind of insensitivity or “anesthesia” about one’s own contradictions. Evidently then, what is crucial is to be aware of the nature of one’s own “blocks.” If one is alert and attentive, he can see for example that whenever certain questions arise, there are fleeting sensations of fear, which push him away from consideration of these questions, and of pleasure, which attract his thoughts and cause them to be occupied with other questions. So one is able to keep away from whatever it is that he thinks may disturb him. And as a result, he can be subtly defending his own ideas, when he supposes that he is really listening to what other people have to say.

When we come together to talk, or otherwise to act in common, can each one of us be aware of the subtle fear and pleasure sensations that “block” his ability to listen freely? Without this awareness, the injunction to listen to the whole of what is said will have little meaning. But if each one of us can give full attention to what is actually “blocking” communication while he is also attending properly to the content of what is communicated, then we may be able to create something new between us, something of very great significance for bringing to an end the at present insoluble problems of the individual and of society.