

# **Bohm Dialogue “INDICATORS” PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES**

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*Bohm Dialogue (a.k.a. Dialogue) is a form of conversational practice developed by quantum physicist David Bohm as a method of collective deepening into more coherent collective dimensions of consciousness which could serve to heal and transform the world. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohm\\_Dialogue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohm_Dialogue)*

*The material below was originally developed and provided by coach Jeff Groethe who brought Eastern spiritual understandings and exercises to a Bohm Dialogue group he hosted that met every Wednesday night in Berkeley California for two and a half years in the early mid-1990s. A former member of that group, Tom Atlee, transcribed, edited, and modified several versions of Groethe’s original essay into its current form in mid-2016, more than 80% of which is identical to the originals. It is offered for open use and further modification by anyone interested, with no limitations or permissions required. - Tom Atlee*

*Jeff recalls “What we had attempted to do in our group was to attend simultaneously to two levels of what was happening in our dialog: content and process. Putting our attention on the process level helped us to see the system level of our meaning making, a major theme of Bohm’s. An ‘indicator’ was simply something we used as a signal to shift our attention from content to process. Identifying indicators provided a general framework of process and content levels of attention during a dialog that turned the group interaction into a type of social meditation. This brought reflective awareness into play, and with reflective awareness we have a potentially valuable practice for supporting personal and social evolution.”*

## **THE INDICATORS**

Several interrelated principles remind us of attitudes we want to sustain in Dialogue:

Learning  
Presence  
Respect  
Responsibility for experience  
Shared inquiry  
Non-efforting  
Wholeness

The guidelines provided below under each of these principles give us ways to challenge ourselves to understand and live the principle more fully, especially in formal Dialogue

practice. They give shape to our aspiration for mindful, present, authentic shared awareness and communication.

In Dialogue group practice, members of the group can indicate when they see any of these principles or guidelines being exemplified or violated, not to judge each other, but to invite group mindfulness of how these dynamics play out among them. One Dialogue group invited anyone to say “ding!” (imitating a mindfulness bell) whenever they noticed a departure from pure Dialogue. It was considered a gift, rather than a correction (although the group needed to learn to experience it in that positive way!!).

## Principle One

### **LEARNING**

We could define Dialogue as "mutual learning" or learning together. Contrast this attitude with the “know-it-all” attitudes of self-righteousness, authority and ego. When we keep ourselves open to learning, our experience feels more interesting, vital and alive. We can do this in many ways:

#### **1) Appreciating ambiguity and uncertainty; valuing the unknown**

New learning usually begins with ambiguity or uncertainty. These often disturb us, unsettling our comfortable certainties. We try to get rid of them as soon as we can, by denying them or "jumping to conclusions." When we short-circuit our learning like this, we prevent fresh insights,

Too often, we try to know something prematurely by forcing it to fit our current assumptions and understandings. But we don't have to fight ambiguity and uncertainty. Instead, we can allow discoveries to emerge naturally as we explore. Meaning can self-organize or "disambiguate" at its own pace. The most patient learners usually harvest the richest understanding.

*We can value ambiguity and uncertainty as indicators that, if we pay good attention, we'll probably learn something new. Beyond that, we can actively seek the unknown in what we and others consider known. That places us at the growing edge of discovery.*

#### **2) Classifying things tentatively**

Usually we take our experience and try to "nail it down" into classification, names, categories. As soon as we see a tree, we place it in the category "tree." That category then replaces our primary experience of the unique tree before us. We cease to really SEE the actual tree.

Although classification can give us useful understandings for engaging with the world, we should not make our categories, names and ideas more real than the experience from which they arise. Instead of "nailing down" our understandings, we can keep them flexible and open to change. This way they can adjust to "reality" as time goes on,

Too often, we assume that the names we give things reveal their true nature. We end up living in a world of abstraction. If we want to learn, though, we need to appreciate how much more there is to reality than what we think about it. (We can sense in ourselves how our full, unique individuality is hidden by labels like "person" or "consumer" or our names.) Instead of revealing the true nature of reality, categories simply serve as temporarily useful models. Realizing this, we can learn to feel the unknown peeking from behind our categories and certainties. This can make us more sensitive to the fullness of experience and to ongoing opportunities for new learning.

*The more tentatively we classify things, the more readily we can learn.*

### **3) Staying engaged with questions**

Usually when we ask a question, we either wait for an answer or actively search for it. In either case we focus on the prospective answer. In doing so, we discard our attitude of learning in favor of satisfying our answer-hunger. When our question is finally "answered" our learning comes to an abrupt halt and the question evaporates.

In Dialogue we have another approach. We often use questions differently. We learn to shift our focus from answers back to the questions themselves. Instead of something to answer, we view questions as our companions, as guides in a continuing adventure of exploration, discovery and learning. We call such a question an "inquiry." Our intention shifts from finding an answer to deepening our inquiry so it can generate continuing insight. (Some people compare an inquiry to a fruit tree which continually generates nourishment if we attend to it.)

We come to see an answer as an "agent of certainty" - something to end the discomfort of not knowing. Conclusions, authorities, and beliefs also act as agents of certainty. Hidden behind all these - and behind the questions or problems which inspire them - we always find assumptions. These assumptions limit our thinking. We can transcend such limits as we deepen our inquiries. This can involve questioning any authority (including ourselves) that claims to have answered a question. It usually involves bringing hidden assumptions to the surface and examining them. It can also involve trying out different ways of forming a question or problem or looking at it from different perspectives.

*The longer we sustain our attention on an inquiry without "wrapping it up" or nailing it down," the more we can learn from it.*

### **4) Listening while speaking**

Musicians hear their music at the same moment the audience does. We can practice a similar awareness in Dialogue. If we truly listen (to our words, our hearts, our inquiry) while we speak, we can stay in a learning mode instead of lecturing or simply reporting on old experience. (David Bohm makes a distinction between (a) present-time thinking and feeling that is new and immediate and (b) stating in the present certain “thoughts and felts” that we’ve had or said in the past, as if they are new. Dialogue practice can help us ground into the real present.)

Listening and learning as we speak usually involves slowing down considerably from our habitual fast pace of communications. It also requires actively embracing the unknown rather than slouching into the comfort of seemingly conclusive past experiences.

*When we speak fully in the present, and keep our attention fully present while we speak, we can learn from ourselves as much as from others.*

### **5) Letting new information change us**

In our current model of education we simply add on new information and remain largely unaffected by it. For greater learning, however, we can engage in an inquiry WITH the new information. We can, for example, explore the implications of the new information. We may find that our whole structure of meaning needs to shift to fully honor those implications. In this way learning helps us grow instead of stuffing us or plastering us with information.

We could almost say that, in real learning, meaning digests us, rather than the other way around.

*The more we encourage information to change us, the more learning we get from each piece of data.*

### **6) Learning from unwanted patterns**

Unchanging, unwanted patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior - in our own lives or in the world around us - point to areas ripe for new learning. This insight embraces some of the most mundane and profound issues in life.

Among the most powerful dysfunctional patterns in our lives is how we push away death. We can explore this realm by asking: How might accommodating to the knowledge of our eventual death effect our actions and intentions? How can we learn to die as static self-images without physically dying?

Likewise, we can confront systemic dynamics in our society, our politics, our economics, and the roles we play in those, and how those roles and dynamics shape our lives.

Learning implies change. So we can look for such patterns and ask what we need to learn in those areas. Then we can gauge our learning by how the patterns change.

*In Dialogue we can often discover or help each other see unwanted patterns and learn together as we overcome them.*

## Principle Two

### **PRESENCE**

Present experience, sensed fully enough, contains everything we need to deepen our inquiry. We could, then, define Dialogue as inquiry into present experience. A number of factors contribute to our presence in Dialogue:

#### **7) Maintaining engagement**

How engaged do we feel? If we find ourselves disengaging, we can become present with our disengagement. We can notice any factors contributing to it (e.g., general fatigue, unfamiliar terms or concepts, lack of opportunity to speak). Simply recognizing our disengagement may re-engage us. We can also speak up or ask a question. Interestingly enough, describing to the group our sense of disengagement engages them in our world and us in theirs, evaporating the disengagement.

*Noticing and speaking our disengagement can, by itself, help us keep engaged.*

#### **8) Relaxed whole-experience alertness**

Attention that focuses outward can dissociate us from our "inner" experience, while attention that focusses inward can dissociate us from our "outer" experience. Can all aspects of experience stay included in present sensing rather than creating a focus / dissociation split?

*In a relaxed, alert whole-experience state nothing in experience gets "lost" through focusing.*

#### **9) Staying present while listening**

How often do we notice ourselves preparing or waiting to speak and not really listening to others speaking? If our good listening prevents us from speaking, it may indicate a need to slow down the speed of the Dialogue or practice some turn-taking technique (e.g., through circles or enforced pauses).

*Noticing how our attention moves from what others are saying to what we want to say can help us remain alert and support such alertness in our group.*

### **10) Staying present with the past**

Our sense of the past manifests in the form of present-time thoughts, feelings and images. One technique for growing into the present involves describing our sense of the past in the present tense. For example: "When I think of what you said, I feel anxious." Or "The image I have of our last meeting is one of real harmony." Or "I assume that my parents wanted a daughter when I was born."

*We can stay in the present more successfully when we speak from the reality that the past exists only in our present thoughts and feelings.*

### **11) Accepting our experience**

Presence involves "being with what is" - a willingness to feel what we feel and experience what we experience. Avoidance and denial lead to stuck feelings and blind spots in our thinking. When we accept our experience, it informs and animates us. When we push experience away, it pushes back, degrading our awareness, health and relationships.

*Dialogue calls us to embrace as much of our experience as we can.*

### **12) Speaking and acting with authenticity**

Accepting and staying engaged with our whole experience generates a reality from which we can speak and act. Authenticity involves remaining true to that reality and inviting others to share in it. It is living into fuller coherence between our inner experience and how we present ourselves to the world.

*Becoming present means challenging ourselves to greater and greater levels of authenticity.*

## Principle Three

### **RESPECT**

A respectful attitude in Dialogue means not just granting others the right to be who they are, but especially respecting the whole that we form together. Rather than stepping outside of that whole to relate to someone, we listen to the voice of the whole speaking within and around us and appreciate what each of us brings to that whole. We try to use descriptive or additive - rather than negative - language when responding to one another.

To the extent we do this, we will all feel drawn into and held by the whole rather than pushed or drifting into separation.

### **13. Exploring present experience rather than giving out feedback**

Thoughts and feelings that arise in relation to others can enrich the Dialogue. However, in order to respect the whole that we form together, I don't "give out" feedback as if to give you a gift of my insight or experience, nor do I push or hit you with it. I may explore feelings, perceptions and interpretations that arise in me in response to something you said or did, but that exploration has to do with my inquiry and my learning as an intrinsic part of the group. I don't focus on you, attempting to get you to learn or understand something.

*We can re-perceive feedback - given, received, or witnessed - as potential insight arising from the whole group's interactions to inform the whole group's consciousness.*

### **14. Shared intention regarding directiveness**

Occasionally one may have creative flashes and want to lead the group or an individual in an experiment or in a certain direction. One may also want to shift the attention of the group to look at some underlying dynamic one sees going on, or wish to ask a question expecting a direct answer. Such directiveness can serve the group, but only if all involved agree to its value. Of course disagreement can also be a stimulus for inquiry and exploring assumptions.

*When one part of the whole group seeks to direct the attention or action of another part of the whole group - or direct the group as a whole - the spirit of respect is honored by inviting shared intention and readily letting go of the impulse if it is not shared.*

### **15. Empathy**

Empathy means listening from the inside, not from the outside as an observer. Whoever speaks, speaks as a voice of the whole of which we are a part. Hear as if you spoke those words; as if you had the experience from which the words come. Refrain from reassuring, critiquing, or solving, which tend to produce self-consciousness or resistance. Don't do anything (such as probing with questions) that diverts attention from the process that needs to unfold.

*Listening into shared experience paradoxically both respects and dissolves boundaries among the participants.*

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR EXPERIENCE

From particle physics to psychology experiments in perception and memory, we're discovering how powerfully the limitations and structures of our mind and senses shape what we believe we have perceived and what we think we know.

Our experience will unfold as a function of what we've brought to that experience. Our models and postulates will condition what we discover. Change the model and we see something different which may be equally valid. Reality becomes more a function of personal and collective thought patterns. We evoke reality at least as much as we are affected by it.

There is always way more going on - both inside us and around us - than we can actually comprehend. Experience indicates how we've organized meaning rather than what "is" objectively real. (In some ways, "reality" could be said to be illusory, as many mystics claim. However, Philip K. Dick provides a useful balance to that: "Reality is what's still there when you stop believing in it.")

We can together embrace more of what's real - and reframe what we think is real - by seeing through the lenses of our diverse experience (a phenomenon known as intersubjectivity). Dialogue involves an effort to take in more of what's available to be seen - especially to notice the ways we limit and structure our experience and to take responsibility for that as active participant-observers.

### 16. Suspending judgments

By the word "judgment" we mean a particular type of classifying characterized by dividing things and experiences into evaluative categories like true/false, good/bad, and right/wrong. And by "suspending" we mean both "to set aside" (so our judgments don't dominate our seeing, thinking and feeling) and "to hang in our midst" (so they can be collectively observed and questioned).

A trap with judgmental labels is that using them makes it very easy to forget or discount the biases we bring to evaluations. We assume an "objective observer" stance and pass judgment as to what "is" or "isn't" true, right or good.

With the ending of clearly accessible objectivity - driven by modern science as much as by philosophy - we can no longer assume the existence of truth in any absolute sense. Our cherished beliefs - without the assumption of truth or the investment of our identity - become postulates that we can question freely without any feeling of personal threat. We evaluate a postulate as to its usefulness and its role in larger understandings rather than its "truth".

Evaluations based on usefulness do not imply the "objective stance" of judgments

because the questions “useful to whom?” and “useful for what purpose?” immediately come up. The contribution of the evaluator’s intention as well as the assumptions and values underlying that intention immediately become plain.

Stage of development can also serve as a basis for making non-judgmental distinctions. It adds the implication of change over time which helps avoid the conclusiveness of judgment. Things can be tentatively concluded based on more or less comprehensive information or the extent or stage of their unfolding or their place in the larger evolving scheme of things.

*Dialogue invites us to that dynamic place of relationship that the Persian poet Rumi described vividly - “Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there” - and adds that the field also lies beyond notions of true and false, good and bad, and other evaluative approaches. Dialogue’s invitation is as open as we want it to be.*

## **17. Suspending assumptions**

An assumption is an assumption because we *assume* it: we take it on as the way things are. It is transparent: We see *through* it since it is a lens that helps us make our sense of the world. So it is very hard for each of us to identify our own assumptions. However, since we don’t all share the same assumptions, it is not so hard for me to notice yours and for you to notice mine - at least if we consciously pay attention to that.

Feelings of disagreement often harbor hidden assumptions at their roots and can thus direct our attention in that direction. Dialogue among diverse people can thus help us all see the assumptions underlying what we believe, say and do.

In this guideline “suspending” emphasizes the second definition described in #16 above - “to hang up” as if for all to see. So suspending assumptions simply means noting or articulating them for the group. In Dialogue practice, “suspending” also implies a lack of identity investment or ownership of the assumption (whether it is ours or someone else’s) so that the group can now feel free to explore it or question it without offending anyone.

*Dialogue is perhaps most uniquely about identifying and holding up assumptions that separate us, en route to understanding and experiencing the more fundamental common ground of our shared consciousness.\**

## **18. Responsibility for feeling**

Typically we confuse feelings and perceptions with “reality” and discount our participation in forming what we feel and perceive. While feelings and perceptions may not establish “objective” reality, they do accurately reflect how we’ve organized meaning.

In Dialogue we take responsibility for feeling by locating its source in our assumptions and interpretations rather than making the codependent assumption of “I or it makes you feel \_\_\_\_” or “you or it makes me feel \_\_\_\_”. We can say, for example, “When you say that, I feel \_\_\_ because I’m assuming \_\_\_\_\_ (or telling myself a story that \_\_\_\_\_)”.

*Taking responsibility for feeling by locating its source in the realm of our assumptions and interpretations leads to a greater sense of personal freedom.*

## **19. Interest in disturbance**

Surfacing and questioning deeply held assumptions and habits of consciousness often feels disturbing. Interest in disturbance means using it as a cue for self-exploration and unraveling stuck parts of our consciousness rather than indulging in avoidance and blame.

A feeling of disturbance lets us know the limitations of the coherence of our current understanding. It points to areas ripe for fresh insight, for aspects of life with which we have not yet fully engaged.

*To embrace disturbance as a cue for self-exploration, we must resist the conditioned urge of fight or flight.*

## Principle Five

### **SHARED INQUIRY**

By shared inquiry we mean maintaining an attitude of collegiality, of belonging to the same team even in the context of different views and feelings, seeing each view as a facet of a complex and evolving whole that we’re all involved in together.

## **20. Open up attachment to positions**

Differences in views and feelings give us the opportunity to recognize if we have invested our identity with those views and feelings. If we have, then we will feel defensive and/or separated from anyone expressing different views. Can we stay together in one inquiry rather than disintegrating into debate - the defense of positions? Differences may then become resources for information and new learning rather than impediments and sources of conflict.

*Notice when an inquiry starts to polarize into positions. Feeling defensive, agreeing (including nodding “uh-huh”) or disagreeing (including shaking our heads) or feeling aligned or separated from those of the same or different views all indicate a falling out of*

*shared inquiry. Starting with “but” may also indicate polarization.*

## **21. Move toward shared understanding**

With a bias toward shared understanding rather than agreement, Dialogue makes room for a great deal of diversity.

*As a speaker, we pay attention to how comprehensible our listeners experience us. As a listener we try to transform lack of understanding into our own inquiry. We describe what we understand, what seems fuzzy and where we jump off into the unknown.*

### Principle Six

#### **NON-EFFORTING**

In the ambition and effort to get somewhere, we focus our attention outward and dissociate from present experience. Having left present experience - our source of creativity and new insight - we can only spin our wheels, repeating past patterns.

Being present with what's arising now within and among us keeps our individual and collective attention in the effortless flow of creativity, novelty, evolution.

## **22. Noticing effort as a function of awareness**

The feeling of effort serves as an important indicator of falling out of present sensing. When noticing effort, come back to present sensing. Here are some helpful hints:

- Sense into the question rather than efforting to find the answer.
- Sense the present in the context of a vision rather than efforting to achieve a goal.
- Sense the meaning that arises rather than trying to follow meaning as if it existed “out there.”
- Sense the implications of insight rather than trying to apply it.
- Sense the level of choicelessness rather than efforting to make choices. The conflict of choice indicates some avoidance or dissociation from the level of feeling that would engender the clarity of choicelessness.

*If something comes, let it come and be with it. If nothing comes, let nothing come and be with it.*

## **23. Relevation (not revelation)**

The physicist David Bohm coined the term “relevate” by putting together the words “elevate” and “relevant.” Can we sense meaning *as it arises through relevance*, similar

to how we sense through our other senses, rather than efforting to try and follow meaning “out there” or trying to put things together or search through memory files “inside”?

Many impulses may relevelate. Which ones do you intuitively sense you could travel a great distance with, or in other words deepen with the inquiry? Which ones feel old, familiar, and mechanical - a replaying of dead recordings from the past? Which ones are thoroughly fresh and present?

*Are we staying open, with the contents of consciousness available to relevelate, or at times are we hiding out in a private world? Can we let meaning “bubble up” and notice it?*

## **24. Creative tension**

A great deal of stress comes from efforting to achieve some goal or goals. What if we approached achieving as a creative rather than efforting process? Many of us can recall experiences of working on something and entering into periods of timeless creativity or “flow”. Appropriate insights and actions emerge or relevelate naturally in the moment; we become tools of what wants to happen rather than engineers of what comes next.

Entering into timeless creativity feels vastly different than efforting. Efforting implies a focus on the goal and a devaluing of the present. The gap between the present and the goal produces stress and emotional tension.

*If we do not devalue the present, but sense with acceptance the present and the goal equally, then the gap between the present and the goal produces creative tension. Creative tension produces something in consciousness analogous to a magnetic field in which energy wants to move in the direction of creating the vision or goal. Energy can then move without effort and stress.*

## Principle Seven

### **WHOLENESS**

The wholeness of life shows up in diverse realms. Any careful examination of reality - whether close, deep, or broad - reveals the great extent to which diverse phenomena are both densely interconnected and facets or expressions of a seamless whole. Among the many manifestations of this are these:

- \* Patterns repeat in diverse realms or at different levels of operation - a phenomenon mathematically explored in the science of fractals, as exemplified by the branching patterns of trees, rivers, and veins.
- \* Mystics experience “a world in a grain of sand... and eternity in an hour”, the fundamental unity of the Cosmos, and “that of God in every person”.
- \* Field and quantum physicists like Bohm see the seeming solidity of matter arising

from interactions between facets of an underlying unified field.

\* Ecologists study the interdependence of species and the ways they together generate the entire ecosystem that then shapes their lives and behaviors.

\* Lasers aimed through one *fragment* of a holographic plate form a 3D image that is identical (though less detailed) than the image formed when lasers pass through the *whole* holographic plate (similar to the way a set of color separations each display most forms contained in the entire picture).

\* Synergy - the fact that a whole is other or greater than the sum of its parts - generates emergent phenomena like the strength of triangles or the liquidity of water at room temperature (water is, after all, “just” hydrogen and oxygen, which are gasses at room temperature).

We can observe such patterns in ourselves and in our Dialogues. We can see our individual and collective fields of meaning structuring the patterns of our actions and experiences just as magnetic fields structure the behavior of iron filings and as gravitational fields structure the behavior of planets and tides. We can observe synergies among our diverse thoughts and feelings - and our access to transpersonal intelligence - generating deeper insights into the nature of life and deeper possibilities for our futures.

In Dialogue we sense into the whole that we form, manifest, and access together. We practice listening to the voice of the whole that is in each of us and to the uniqueness that each of us brings to the whole. We practice speaking from the whole to the whole.

## **25. Form the inquiry in a way that has relevance to all**

To take on (identify with) the inquiry as uniquely “about me” or “about them”, personalizes what is actually shared and universal, feeding a sense of separateness. In virtually every case we can see a personal problem, event, need, gift or limitation as a personal version of something experienced by - or characteristic of - most or even all human beings.

*Look deeply enough to sense everything surrendered to the inquiry as transpersonal - as a shared aspect of human experience. In that way, no matter how personal the details, the inquiry has relevance to all of us.*

## **26. Sense our contributions to the inquiry as forming one whole**

Our individual experiences and offerings are, in fact, facets of a whole that - if we persist in Dialogue - becomes clearer as we proceed.

*Notice the interconnections between the various themes and feelings that come up in the inquiry. If you don't see how a particular contribution relates, assume that its deeper connection has not yet revealed itself.*

## **27. Invite greater knowledge**

We as individuals or as groups form a microcosm of the Whole. If the part contains the whole then self-exploration gives us access to the Infinite. However, just as a larger piece of the holographic plate gives greater resolution of the holographic image, group sensing usually provides fuller access to the Infinite.

*Open yourself to the larger meanings that seem to want to emerge among us, and contribute to that impulse for emergence.*

## **28. Sense and co-create a common pool (field) of meaning**

No matter what stage our Dialogue is in, we share a common pool of meaning. It may be a shared pool of fragmented meanings, but we share it. Through Dialogue that meaning-filled field can become increasingly coherent - through synergies, revelations, revelations, and deepening into universalities - such that we then share that coherence.

*Develop coherence in the field of meaning we form together as a group. Understand our similarities, differences, common ground - and share that understanding with each other. Then let it evolve, participating together in that evolution.*

## **29. Step out of linear time and agency**

Dialogue exhibits a strange synchronistic quality in which patterns in our process often illustrate patterns in the content that we are talking about. In noticing that, we step out of linear time and agency. We don't talk about something so that we can later act; the exploring becomes the acting and the acting becomes exploring. Exploring shifts the field of meaning out of which all action arises and as we explore our actions in a seamless ongoing way, the distinctions between exploring and acting disappear.

*Live into the actions that inquiry reveals and into the inquiries that action invites and enter the timeless flow of enlivened learning in the evolving field of meaning.*

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*\* Jeff recalls that "the exercise to suspend (articulate) at least one assumption you are making each time you speak often led to lots of laughter. We named it the Hahayana. For literally weeks and weeks on end we spent a good portion of our time laughing."*