

Insight Dialogue and Insight Meditation: An Interview with Gregory Kramer By Eleanor Rachel Luger

After years of exercises at the ballet barre, I had achieved perfect body alignment. The crown of my head reached for the ceiling, my neck was long, spine straight as an arrow, shoulders up and back, chest open, ribs in, stomach pulled up and in, thighs, knees, calves, ankles and feet pulled up and turned out, arches up and toes spread, arms extended from my torso, insides of my elbows faced out, fingers reached long.

Following work at the barre, the teacher would demonstrate a sequence of choreography for the class to follow. As I moved across the floor, my perfect alignment did not. My neck sank into my shoulders, my stomach stuck out, my legs turned in and my arms went limp. My perfect alignment disappeared. What a challenge it was to take the posture I had worked so hard in class to attain and maintain it as I went from standing at the barre to dancing across the floor.

Just as it is the dancer's challenge to transfer her perfect alignment from stillness into motion, it is the meditator's challenge to transfer her sitting practice from silence into conversation. Neither task is easy; both take years of dedication (for most of us). However, when realized, they both allow for a fuller and deeper expression of the disciplines they serve. (Dance in one case, meditation, in the other.)

The practice of Insight Dialogue gives us a way to move our individual, silent practice from the cushion to the arena of our verbal exchanges with other people. Gregory Kramer, who co-invented Insight Dialogue with Terri O'Fallon, will be in New York City in January for an evening and a day to help us find, as he so simply puts it, "the voice of our meditation."

Kramer, a long-time vipassana practitioner and teacher, explains that through Insight Dialogue, "Practitioners come to realize that the field of mindfulness is not limited to their interior existence," but can inform their dealings in "exterior" society, as well. A practice that listens and talks seems especially sensible--and certainly useful, perhaps irresistible--when Kramer assures us that Insight Dialogue provides a way to "practice mindfulness in relationship and so get better at it." Who among us does not want to improve our interaction with family, friends and co-workers, not to mention the myriad of other human beings we encounter on a daily basis?

While talking meditation may seem an oxymoron, Kramer proposes in the How to Practice Insight Dialogue section of his web site (Metta.org.), that listening and speaking meditation are as logical as sitting and walking meditation. Kramer continues, "The Buddha taught mindfulness in all things, suggesting the meditator be 'clearly aware of what (s)he is doing, in looking...bending...eating, drinking...passing excrement...in speaking or in staying silent.'" Kramer observes that the Buddha said very little about how to develop speech awareness or "the relationship between meditating and using words" or the "transformative potential inherent in the fires of relationship." For

instance, right speech, Kramer notes, applies specifically to the articulation of words that are "true and useful."

Surprisingly, Kramer and O'Fallon's original work involved moving the ages-old practice of vipassana meditation from the cushion to the computer. Insight Dialogue's first incarnation was on-line as the pair attempted to answer the question, "How do you practice a sincere dialogue on line?" Kramer says the first step was to bring a "meditative attitude to dialogue, working mindfully and slowly, paying attention to the body and the breath." A few years later, Kramer began to develop Insight Dialogue as a 'face-to-face' practice at meditation retreats and weekly groups. It is the face-to-face practice that Kramer will teach at the retreat, *Relaxing into Wisdom and Lovingkindness: Buddhist Insight Meditation*.

Like its silent sister, Insight Dialogue proceeds around instructions that the teacher gives to practitioners. People in pairs, threes, even large groups can engage in Insight Dialogue together.

The nine instructions, or guidelines, have the same foundation as those given in traditional vipassana, and encourage the practitioner to make a full commitment to being in the present moment: "step out of reactive habits and into mindfulness and lovingkindness;" have no agenda and surrender "to not knowing"; and become aware of the reactive nature of the mind, for example. However, because this is a relational, dialogic practice, some of the guidelines pertain directly to the speaking and listening. For instance, the instruction "to notice the tendency of people to evoke habitual responses in each other" or "to speak with confidence and discernment" and "to move beyond the surface of personality"; and "recognize the endless flow of judgments and the stress that accompanies them"; and last, but not least, to have the courage to share your thoughts and feelings.

As Kramer states on his web site, the guidelines themselves are rich with meaning: "They suggest not only how we actually conduct the meditation, but also the attitudes underlying the practice." They encompass both the "meditative, dialogic aspect of the practice as well as the insight nature of it." Over time, as practitioners cultivate the skill to "speak when moved and listen deeply," the guidelines become internalized. He concludes, "As the practice deepens, the guidelines function as powerful meditation instructions, pointing the way toward profound spiritual awakening. Over time, Insight Dialogue becomes a way of living."

The practice develops by going from silence into listening and speaking. Kramer emphasizes that silence is an integral part of Insight Dialogue because, "In silence, we see how the hearts and minds are stirred by activity. We begin the practice with silence, then open the door to speaking. We gradually begin to know when our minds get attached and 'sticky,' when we experience the grasping that is the cause of dukkha [suffering]. Only then can we begin to open to each other.

"For example, you identify that you are agitated; follow the instruction to pause, relax, open to meet the experience. If you really are meditating in the pause, you will feel yourself open to a relaxed awareness that encompasses

everything around you. As you open your awareness from internal to external experience, you are moved to speak the truth. And the next instruction, trust emergence, comes naturally. You learn to dive into the changing moment with no agenda, with an unknowing mind and surrendering heart." At this point, Kramer writes, "Minds become steadier, hearts more loving. [People] become increasingly attentive to what is going on, inside and outside themselves, and can be more responsive and clear."

While Kramer acknowledges that Insight Dialogue helps people speak more authentically by teaching them how to "bring awareness and compassion to their everyday human encounters," be they with fellow sangha members or non-meditators, he says it is not a "communication technique," per se. Insight Dialogue is first a meditation practice and basis for wise living. It also has powerful benefits in communication and relationship. At its core, Insight Dialogue provides a path for us to follow to develop the qualities of heart and mind that can set us free. Kramer elaborates on how Insight Dialogue encompasses the three basic elements of the Path of Cultivation (Bhavana): "It helps us cultivate Sila, or morality, by enabling us to become more attuned and skillful in our relationship with words, and thus with other people. It allows us to perfect Samatha, or tranquillity that supports our remaining steady in the moment of experience. Insight Dialogue helps us cultivate a calm mind, which enhances our life by enriching our meditation practice and our relationships. And finally, through vipassana meditation, and by extension, Insight Dialogue, we develop panna, or wisdom. We come to possess clear awareness of walking, speaking, and remaining silent."

Kramer considers Insight Dialogue an effective antidote to our over-active minds. "We tend to be intense and to scrutinize every detail of our existence," he points out. Kramer believes the incessant analyzing is a mental distraction, a way of giving our minds something to do. However, in the end, if we are to be free, we must let go of the scrutinizing mind. Using the Insight Dialogue process, Kramer teaches practitioners how to calm down in the moment--"to relax our tangled brains and be mindful of areas of tension." In short, Kramer says, "Be calm and present, cultivating the same attitude in speech as in silent meditation."

Kramer describes himself as an active and involved teacher, attentive to the groups he is working with. At the beginning of retreats, he only allows the dialogue to continue for a few minutes before he rings the bell, so people will recognize when they have fallen into reactive habits of thought and speech. As Insight Dialogue practice becomes more steady, meditators learn to step out of identification and stress even while engaged with others. While he underscores the positive benefits of Insight Dialogue, Kramer cautions that the "process can be challenging, even stressful, as difficult material, aversion and grasping [are] perceived with unprecedented clarity."

Kramer believes a "broad spectrum" of meditators can benefit from practicing Insight Dialogue. For the more experienced practitioners, those who "already have noticed stillness," the benefit will be a "deepening and broadening of their practice," Kramer predicts. He says it will help beginners "find some calm in the midst of the reactive habits of the heart." For those leery or downright afraid of a retreat experience that includes verbal interaction with other participants,

Kramer asks, "What better situation to work out those discomforts than in the calm, reassuring atmosphere of a meditation retreat, where everyone has a shared commitment to wisdom and compassion? Often participants find their social anxiety or need to prove themselves abates, and they leave the retreat changed people." 12/13