

## **Deprogramming Through Dialogue**

Anand Dwivedi

Imagine a space of shared meaning. Where each individual of a community has a separate identity and awareness of his/her self that is deeply connected with the awareness of others about him/her. Where an understanding of each other is enhanced by shared bonds of vulnerability, realization and support, of love and a sense of connectedness. Where communication is not necessarily verbal, but perhaps intuitive, instant, spontaneous. Where egos and empty rhetoric have been dropped in the search for truth, a search for the meanings of universe, life, death, existence, nature, etc. Where the emphasis is on relationships, an enhanced understanding of the connection between the self and the other (whoever/whatever that may be). Where learning is constant and shared, always in relation to the realizations of others. Where evolution of meaning is a way of life. Where there is a constant search for the new. Where such shared understanding then spurs action for collective living. Where modes of organization would then evolve naturally, without plans, without perhaps even sitting together to confer or control. Where organization would occur because each individual would know and be complete in thought, place and action natural to that self.

In such spaces, thoughts and actions would emerge not from the tiny parts of the mind we use today — so dependent on incomplete memory and past knowledge often external to our selves — but rather from an expanded consciousness, born out of dialogue. The creation and re-creation of such spaces of shared meaning is, for me, the essence of a learning society.

The above, sadly, is perhaps everything that does not happen in the spaces that we currently live and die in. Today, we exist in spaces of somebody else's meaning. Meanings we happen to share, not because we believe in or understand them, but because we know no other and have not bothered to engage in ways to question/contest the validity and truth of these meanings. We exist in spaces that control us externally, that manipulate our processes of making meaning in order to continue to enslave us. The problems facing the world today may be described in terms of oppressive systemic relationships which are grounded in weapons of mass-destruction, exploitation of the poor, and violence against the environment.

Then there are not-so-obvious deeper problems that emerge from institutions of thought-control, such as the education system and the mass media. Such institutions try to control what people think and feel. For example, my own experiences in various schools and colleges throughout India has led me to believe that our modern education system is designed to program children's minds. By the time most children reach puberty, they have been successfully 'educated' to accept and perpetuate current problems. Our education system succeeds in destroying children's capacity to think on their own and programs them to believe that there is only one right way to think. Schooling also trains children to be selfish and competitive, to be concerned with only their own individual success, to 'pass' by any means necessary (even if it means everybody else fails/loses), and to try to be superior to others. As the child grows into adulthood, he or she has already internalized a particular meaning of the world; i.e., the world is a place where everybody has to compete to get what one wants, where one has to accumulate/consume more than others in order to be successful, where success means money/power/titles, where every country needs bombs and armies to defend itself, and so on. This is the dominant meaning of life and the world that people carry within their minds today and it is this meaning which manifests into their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. In this meaning of life, there is no place for creativity, responsibility, or loving relationships. Knowledge is something that has been already discovered by others. It is fixed and unchangeable. As a result of this programming, people's minds have become industrialized, urbanized, consumerized, and more recently, globalized.

### **What Is a Program?**

We know what a computer program behaves like. It functions only from the memory it has been given and it recognizes only the commands that it has been taught. Similarly, the way we generally think is programmed — our values, lifestyles, how we look at life and the world, how we want to live, what things we want to have and so on. Somebody else (the System, traditions, past knowledge) has determined the codes and we have accepted them, without really questioning or understanding them. We follow a set pattern of codes. And we do most of this quite unconsciously.

*At the Systemic Level...*

A program is a series of codes that are accepted without dispute, and are acceptable only because they are popular and seem to fit into the existing systemic framework. For example, the belief that competition is necessary for progress fits into a systemic framework of a market economy being the ONLY way to achieve a desired standard of living (which is also limited to purely material needs).

#### *At the Individual Level...*

Programming begins from birth, from living collective memories of the past. Since its birth, a child is exposed constantly to certain patterns of thinking and functioning. Socialization then becomes a process of internalizing meta-narratives that are passed from generation to generation, as accepted modes of living and organizing.

At the individual level, the program runs very deep. The conscious part of us subscribes to the dominant systemic program. But at subconscious levels, we ourselves reinforce the program. We are caught in a vicious cycle of habitual thinking. We can all see how our ordinary consciousness is busy all of the time, thinking random thoughts. While cooking, bathing, brushing our teeth, or walking, there is no need to think of anything outside of these immediate actions. Yet, if we stop to observe, we are always busy thinking thoughts that are irrelevant to the specific activity we are involved in. Thinking, therefore, is a compulsive habit for most of us. We seem to have no control over our random thinking; instead, our random thinking interferes with our perceptions and behaviours.

As we grow older, because of habitual ways of forming our perceptions, we lose our sense of the new, of wonderment about the world. Meanings become jaded and fixed. For example, when we meet people, we are seldom sensitive to who the individual is, at that particular point in time and space. Our perceptions get clouded by past experiences and pre-determined ideas and expectations because we do not exercise our innate abilities to perceive in varied ways. Similarly, our understanding of the world and its problems is framed by past knowledge; we do not know how to look at and interact with the world otherwise. If we cannot see clearly, how can we hope to address the roots of systemic challenges?

The habitual mode of functioning is invisible to most of us. This is problematic because that is how a program survives and grows. Because a program works invisibly, we do not see that we are programmed. We will not believe that what we think and feel actually grows from our program. When I say, “this is what I think” or “this is what I feel”, there is an assumption that my feelings and thoughts come from my freedom to feel and think. But if I have the energy to explore myself deeply (which few of us do), I may discover that, in fact, my feelings and thoughts are no more mine. Rather, I have been programmed to think and feel what I think and feel. In other words, I am a slave **always** obeying the commands that I have been taught to obey. Thus, we continue to maintain our program second by second without knowing it.

#### **How the Individual Connects to the Systemic...**

By falling into a habitual mode of living and thinking, we negate very significant parts of our potential as human beings, as well as of the universal reality. Systemic meanings and relationships control people, instead of the other way around. The meanings of death and life, of God and Nature, have already been pre-determined, so we do not make any effort to explore these anew — neither at the individual level or collectively as communities. Any such effort is looked on with skepticism and ridicule, because people think that it is quite unnecessary, a waste of time.

#### **The Problem with a Program**

It is through this program that we maintain the problems of the world. Though it seems like the systems of the world are creating problems, it is we who allow these systems to exist. Even though people may say that they want a society without the existing problems, their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, behavior, actions — all being habitual and programmed in a certain mode — contribute every second to the maintenance of the existing systems. The strength of the System comes from the program that people carry in their minds.

So we can see that the problems of the world are not going to be wiped away unless our ways of thinking and functioning also change. We need two-edged action; we need to challenge the existing systems, while also deprogramming ourselves. I believe if we are really able to de-program ourselves, the systems will automatically begin to dismantle, since our programmed minds fuel the System.

Therefore, we need to find ways of helping ourselves (and others) to see the program and to step out of it. All of us have the energy to step out of the program. In fact, we do step out of it many times; these are times when we are

exceptionally creative, compassionate, carefree, energetic and happy. But this stepping out is accidental, so the program recaptures us again and again. We maintain the program every second; but at every second, we also have the choice to refuse to maintain it. Once we have learnt to deprogram ourselves, then all we need is constant awareness to prevent the return of the program.

### **To Deprogram Oneself**

Accepting that I am programmed and need to be continuously deprogrammed does not suit the ego, because it threatens the very existence of the ego. I would not like to be told that I am programmed, that my thinking is enslaved. I prefer to believe that my mind is free and it is other people who are programmed. In fact, most people would be totally lost if they came to the realization that all of the things with which they associate their “I” (knowledge, values, experiences, beliefs, etc.) need to be put aside if they really want to know their true selves. Deprogramming starts with admitting that one does not know oneself.

Being deprogrammed means that:

- \* People question and explore the meaning and potential of their minds and spirits.
- \* Individuals and collectives delve into a search for meaning; and seek to evolve themselves into conscious, alert human beings in tune with reality. (Reality here is defined as a continually evolving state of being and realization towards increasing clarity in perception.)
- \* Past knowledge, experience and memories do not define present reality but, instead, are usable as resources for the expression and communication of perception. (Perception here means the ability to use our senses, not only physical — taste, touch, smell, sound and sight — but also other natural senses like intuition, non-rational mental states of realization and connection with the other, etc.)
- \* Relationships and connections naturally evolve.

To find ways of stepping out of the program, we need to understand the nature of the program very thoroughly. A program is like an addiction, controlling our behaviour without our realizing it. Even if we are consciously aware of our habitual patterns of thinking and functioning, and realize that these are harmful for ourselves as well as for others, we cannot get out of them easily. For instance, an alcoholic knows the dangers of alcoholism and desires to be free of it. Yet, s/he often feels powerless to get rid of the drinking habit. Similarly, information about the nature of the program does not change the programming in its entirety. I need to come to the realization that as long as I am looking outside for guidance, I cannot get rid of my programming. In essence, if I am programmed, then I can not trust my ordinary consciousness to do the deprogramming. What I need are ways of bypassing my ordinary consciousness so that I can access my expanded consciousness. This means seeing beyond the program and allowing for space for something new to emerge instead.

Getting in touch with expanded consciousness does not imply that the ordinary consciousness comes to an end. What it means is that the ordinary consciousness is no longer busy with itself, and the program alive through the cycle of habit is broken. Once our consciousness gets expanded, we can easily see our random thinking and drop it; as we do this, our ordinary consciousness is expanded beyond its known limits. Through this expanded awareness, the world looks very different from the way our ordinary consciousness perceives it. Now we can see the immensity and beauty of the world and its problems in a larger context. This expanded awareness is much more intelligent than our ordinary awareness. As a result, we are now able to act much more meaningfully.

This does not mean that we can learn nothing from past knowledge. The question is who uses this knowledge. If it is used by my ordinary consciousness (i.e. my program), then it is bound to be confused and misleading. But if it is used by my expanded consciousness, then some of the past knowledge may be put to intelligent use in the present moment. Expanded consciousness looks at past knowledge in a new light; it changes its nature — it is no more the same knowledge which ordinary consciousness knew it to be. In other words expanded consciousness is creative because it meets every new moment with fresh perception and is able to create new techniques, tools, directions, and answers.

If more and more people were able to live through expanded consciousness, they would be able to deal with the present moment more intelligently. As a result, the problems of the world would begin to disappear and the lives of people would be happy and creative. The good news is that ordinary people like us can do something in this direction right now. What we need to do is to create environments that enable us to transcend our ordinary consciousness and connect us with our expanded awareness.

Deprogramming is a journey that one can begin individually or collectively. Here we will focus on collective deprogramming. When such a journey is embarked in a collective, it is easier to break down each other's programs, because there are multiple voices for cracking the codes. One way to collective deprogramming is through dialogue.

### *What Is Dialogue?*

From my experiences of working with different kinds of groups, I came to learn that dialogue has immense potential of enabling us to transcend our ordinary consciousness. Dialogue is a kind of social meditation in the sense that it enables one to be simultaneously aware of oneself and others. Most people take meditation to mean sitting quietly all alone and trying to concentrate on one's thoughts. Social meditation however is totally different in the sense that although one is aware of one's thoughts, one is also interacting with the world.

A dialogue is fundamentally different from a discussion, debate or conversation. When we are conversing, debating, or discussing, we are relying on our old knowledge, on our egos, and on our programmed consciousness. So, there is no possibility of anything new emerging from it. In a dialogue, however, the participants do not rely on the knowledge they already have; nor do they depend on their ordinary consciousness.

In a dialogue, there is no authority, no guru, no leader, no hierarchy, and no predetermined course. If the dialogue is taking place for the first time, or if there are too many new participants, it helps to have one or two facilitators. The role of the facilitators is to see that the participants do not forget to be self-aware while talking and listening. The facilitators, however, do not control the process or the content of the dialogue.

A dialogue can take place anywhere, so long as the same participants remain for the entire length of the dialogue, which can range from a few hours to a few days. Slowly, dialogue can become a way of life for a community. (What I mean by a community is two or more people who are together anywhere and want to consciously engage in a dialogue.) I have participated in dialogues where there were up to 70 people; however, in order to gain depth and intensity, a dialogue should have fewer number of participants, preferably not more than 30.

There is no 'right' and 'wrong' in a dialogue; every participant is free to contribute his or her perceptions. Although every participant needs to be aware that the dialogue is a process of self-transcendence, a journey beyond our illusory separateness into the collective whole, however this awareness need not be a pre-condition to begin a dialogue. To arrive at this awareness is part of the process of dialogue.

### *The Possibilities of a Dialogue*

For a dialogue to be possible, every participant has to learn to be self-aware second by second. This level of self-awareness can be reached via some group activities, which help each of us become highly aware of his or her bodily sensations, breathing, thoughts, feelings, and imagination. Creative group activities like dancing, singing or playing games are especially helpful if the participants do not know one another before. Another kind of exercise that helps people to quickly step out of their individual egos and work collectively as one single mind is to put them in a totally new situation. The novelty of the situation compels them to think together in new ways. In such a situation, all the knowledge that the individuals may have in their minds is not only rendered useless, but it also appears to be an obstacle to seeing new possibilities. And when people do see new possibilities, then they also learn that knowledge can never lead to fresh perception. This exercise can be done with people of all ages and all backgrounds. The new situation may be a riddle to be solved, a strange machine to be repaired, a play to be staged spontaneously or finding food and shelter in a place where nobody knows you and you have no money. We could also practice using our senses with more attention. Gradually, it is possible to be self-aware and, at the same time, be aware of the other participants — their feelings, thoughts, attitudes and attention levels. Once we achieve this level of awareness, the dialogue begins to take shape.

I began to learn about the power of dialogue, a few years ago, when living together with some friends. We were all looking for new meanings in our lives and new ways of relating to society. We were all from different socio-economic-educational backgrounds and often discussed a wide range of topics. However, our most recurrent topic was ourselves. Over time we learnt to be aware of our thoughts while listening and talking. We discovered ways of reminding each one of us to be constantly aware of his body and mind as well as of others' thoughts. 'Awareness' became our code word, and we began to be aware while walking, eating, talking, reading, writing, shopping, almost all the time and everywhere.

We realized that each time we had a dialogue, we touched rare levels of insight. It became a common practice for us not to depend on our ordinary consciousness with all of its collection of old knowledge. We began to share our hidden desires, impulses, dreams and perceptions with one another. One morning, one of my friends came to me and said, "I have come to say sorry to you." When I asked him why he was apologizing, he said, "Last night, I had a dream in which I was asking you to leave this city and go somewhere else. And I was a bit aggressive." I said, "But that was in the dream." He said, "I know, but I wanted to tell you so that if I had anything against you, it is now resolved." From that day on, along with our conscious thoughts we began to be aware of our dreams and their relevance to interpersonal relationships.

When participants in a dialogue begin talking with each other, there need not be a predetermined subject to begin with. The participants may, instead, begin to unfold their hidden urges, emotions, dreams, obsessions and so on. In the light of the heightened awareness, the participants begin to look at themselves very clearly and deeply. As their ordinary consciousness slows down, so does their obsession with thinking. They can begin to see their thoughts very clearly. It is easier to see thoughts while listening rather than while talking. The more we can see our thoughts, the more we can see the gaps between one thought and the next. These gaps make it possible for our ordinary consciousness to access the expanded consciousness.

Through the journey from the ordinary consciousness into the expanded consciousness, the participants will come across all the blocks that clog our minds and maintain our egos. Their beliefs, attachments and the way they define themselves are the blocks. It is not easy for people to transcend these blocks when they encounter them clearly for the first time. These blocks give security and a sense of power to ordinary consciousness; therefore, dissolving them means standing unprotected and vulnerable, without power or security. As the dialogue gains depth, however, it generates a collective field of togetherness, a field of collective intelligence, and the energy that this field generates is so powerful that there is no more the need of the old blocks for protection. Once people move beyond their blocks, they have freed themselves from programs for the time being. (In the process, people also learn how the problems of our society are created and maintained by the accumulated strength of these blocks, and gain insight into how these blocks can be dissolved.)

When the participants begin to function through expanded consciousness, a remarkable phenomenon takes place — the 'I' drops. The definition of myself that I carry in my mind is no more valid; I am no more a 'Hindu' or 'Indian' or 'educated man' and so on. Instead, participants learn to relate to each other at the super-conscious level. Now past knowledge and past experiences cease to have any power over them, and they reach a position where they can honestly say, "I do not know and I am not going to accept what others say unless I feel it myself." There is an unmistakable feeling that their separateness is not as real as their togetherness and that deep down humanity is one. This feeling of oneness is not a logical conclusion; it is rather a deep experience in which logic is absent.

It seems that the state of collective intelligence is common to all humanity. This level is variously termed as "collective intelligence", "nature's intelligence", "universal mind", "the mind of humanity"<sup>1</sup> and so on. All of these terms indicate that if we are able to go deep enough, we become one with an infinite field of intelligence. Through this feeling of oneness, shared meanings emerge, which generate coordinated action. Although a great variety of ideas and activities may unfold, they do not contradict each other, but rather create a harmonious, meaningful pattern.

When I say shared meanings, I do not mean same meanings. Different participants may perceive different meanings, but they realize that all of these meanings emerge from the same collective source. So there is no outside authority organizing, imposing and controlling one's meanings and reality. The life of a community with shared meanings will be self-organizing. Such a community will be free from any external or internal authority. It will be free from the authority of past knowledge and the dominant trends and values of society. And it will also be free from the control of blocks/program/ordinary consciousness.

#### *Dialogue as a Microcosm of a Learning Society*

My experience with dialogues initially began with five friends. Within a couple of years, we had a large community of dozens of friends. Unknown people began to contact us. Some of them just wanted our company; others came with problems. There were drug-addicts, people with relationship problems, mentally disturbed people, people who were on a spiritual quest, and people who wanted to help us in one way or the other. We were amazed how these

people came to know about us. They were all total strangers to us, and we thought that nobody knew us in this city. Gradually we became convinced that nature has her own ways of communication, which are probably too mysterious for any of us to understand.

The people who came did not look at us as experts of any kind. They were attracted because they felt some kind of rare energy in the dialogues. These dialogues turned us into an intelligent learning community. We realized that dialogue is a surprisingly effective way to create a learning community. Many people then began to engage in similar and diverse forms of dialogues in their own communities.

A community engaged in a dialogue is a microcosm of the larger culture and society. It is a community in a state of transformation, examining its present state and going beyond it by unfolding its hitherto unknown, unexperienced, unrealized potential. By examining ourselves and our relationships with other participants, we see the cultural codes that govern our behavior and gain insight into the relational and material equations that govern our society at all levels. By transcending our ordinary consciousness through dialogue, we understand the processes of social transformation and changes in relationships. This gives us a clear insight into the existing systems and problems of the world, the relationships of people to property, power, position, nature, and other human beings. We see how both we and the world are rooted in the past knowledge (or ordinary consciousness) and how we and it can get out of it.

This knowing leads to coordinated action at different levels — the personal, community and trans-community. Actions not guided by past knowledge but by expanded consciousness. At the local level, several new activities may take place, which reorganize the community in a more intelligent way. In other words, the community reaches a high level of self-organization where meanings and actions emerge spontaneously without external control. People will have a feeling of connectedness with one another and with nature. Because of this feeling, the individual will look at the community as an extension of him/herself. Similarly, the world and the entire universe will be seen as an inseparable part of human life. Through dialogue, every individual begins to take responsibility of and for the community. Therefore the actions that emerge from dialogue will be socially and environmentally sensitive.

Creating learning spaces that nurture expanded consciousness is a critical step towards addressing the problems of the world and unfolding the hidden intelligence of humanity. Yet reading about dialogue is not the same as having a dialogue. So whatever meanings one derives rationally about dialogue will never be able to capture the essence of a dialogue. Nor is it possible to express a real experience in words. Words serve their purpose if they lead to action, in this case, to dialogue. Based on my limited experiences I humbly offer the following suggestions:

1. When you are having a meeting (formal or informal) with other people, try to remain self-aware, at least intermittently, if not constantly. Learn to be aware of what is going on in your mind while listening to what others are saying. Continue this awareness while talking. This will bring about a remarkable change in the way you talk, the words you choose, and the things you say. This change in you will affect others also in a tacit way. Slowly, you will gain enough energy to change the course of a discussion/debate into a dialogue without knowing it.
2. With experience you can help any community to start the process of dialogue consciously. Dialogue happens in most communities but it happens accidentally; in these accidental dialogues, people are not self-aware, therefore, they cannot maintain the process of dialogue. That is why it is important to help people engage in dialogue consciously. Any meeting, workshop, training, interaction can be used as an opportunity to introduce the process of dialogue. You do not require any special 'course' or 'certificate'. You should only be extremely careful not to control the content or the process of dialogue.

The above suggestions should not be seen as principles about "How To Start the Process of a Dialogue"! They are just suggestions, which may or may not help you depending on your context. Once you gain your own experience of dialogue, you may realize that these suggestions are extremely inadequate.

This article is based on personal experiences of the writer and the people he has worked with. To understand his views rationally will be of little use. What may be useful is to really engage oneself in dialogue and see what happens.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> These terms have been used by J. Krishnamurti, Rabindranath Tagore, Frijtof Capra, David Bohm, R. L. Wing and a number of other mystics.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anand Dwivedi has been, at different periods in his life, a teacher, a teacher trainer, a *Vipassana* meditation facilitator, and a program officer for PLAN International. He is the author of numerous books on education, including *Mujhe Swayam Seekhne Deejive*, *Poorn Atmanirbhar Shiksha* (both in Hindi) and Holistic Education. Anand has also spent time at Santiniketan and at the Rishi Valley School. For the last few years, he has been traveling around India, working with different organizations and individuals, in a process of learning and unlearning many things about education and development.