

## **Transpersonal Dialogue**

### **Voice Dialogue as a transformative practice**

This article is about the potential of Voice Dialogue to provide not only an excellent map and method for developing our personality, but also a skilful tool for including our spiritual essence into this exploration. I have been involved with Voice Dialogue since the mid 80s and it has been an incredibly rewarding journey for me, not only professionally but also personally. In order to be an effective Voice Dialogue facilitator I need to keep doing own my personal inquiry, discovering new Primary and Disowned Selves, learning other ways of taking care of my vulnerability and developing an ever increasing Aware Ego Process. In particular working with the Transpersonal challenges me to keep my connection with Essence alive in myself, integrating it into my work and daily life. In this way Voice Dialogue has become a transformative practice for me.

When I talk about Transpersonal I mean beyond personality; the energy in us that is without boundaries, deeply connected to everything and everyone. Most of us have had glimpses of this reality, through meditation, peak experiences, making love, being creative, in nature etc. Once we connect with this expansive energy it feels like coming home. We often do not know though how to stay immersed in Being whilst being active in the world. I have found that Voice Dialogue is one of the most effective tools to give us direct access to this space and support us in integrating it into our day-to-day life.

I will be describing the process of intentionally approaching and including the Transcendent within Voice Dialogue processes. I have called this work Transpersonal Dialogue and started to integrate the enquiry into my Voice Dialogue practice over the last 12 years. Most of my individual sessions and trainings focus on traditional Voice Dialogue work developing an Aware Ego Process, but I feel passionate about expanding Voice Dialogue in a number of ways. I hope this article will trigger discussions within our community; I am especially interested in how others work with this material and in developing advanced training programs.

### **My personal journey**

When I started to write this article I recognised that the development of Transpersonal Dialogue within my Voice Dialogue practice is connected to my own psycho-spiritual process. I therefore include some of my personal history and introduce the development of Transpersonal Dialogue as it follows my own journey.

I have been interested in the human psyche since my mid teens and have always been a practical and experiential explorer. Apart from studying psychology and social work within a framework of socialism and feminism, I experimented with a range of alternative therapies in my early twenties, such as co-counselling and radical therapy. Looking for a more transpersonal dimension, I joined a spiritual movement that combined intense emotional release work with active and passive meditation practices. I participated in groups and trainings exploring Rebirthing, Primal, encounter groups, Bioenergetics and Hypnotherapy.

Working as a Rebirther in the mid 80s I discovered Voice Dialogue and together with a group of friends organised Hal and Sidra Stone's first tour to Australia. I have been passionately involved with Voice Dialogue ever since.

### **Psychological versus spiritual**

Because of my background and training there was never a division for me between the exploration of the psyche and the search for what is beyond my personality. It was clear to me, that in order to fully understand myself as a human being, I needed to explore my personality with all its primary and disowned aspects through a variety of psychological approaches. And it was also important to go beyond the personal, to find my transcendent essence through meditation and other spiritual practices.

It seemed though that there was a gap between the approaches towards personality and soul. There was the psychological movement focusing mainly on changing and fixing the personality and the spiritual tradition, endeavouring to overcome and transcend the Ego. In my work with Voice Dialogue I worked primarily with the integration of various parts of the personality through the Aware Ego Process. The spiritual dimension only showed up in sessions by talking to spiritual selves, such as the Higher Self, a Wisdom Voice or a sense of Being. I always approached them as parts of the personality, who were often disowned. Occasionally they were Primary Selves in clients identified with spirituality, protecting them from the experience of their vulnerability.

In the mid 90's I went through another spiritual deepening. This expanding 3-month process catapulted me into an intense questioning of my life and my work. I now experienced my personality as a vessel, something I inhabit just like my body. And like my body it needs understanding, care and focus. To me it feels like a house that I live in, if the roof leaks and the doors don't close it is an uncomfortable place. If I live my life from an automatic Primary Self System, keep repeating unconscious patterns in relationships and am not

connected to my vulnerability, I will not enjoy being on earth. At the same time it is important for me to stay connected to the knowledge that my personality is only a transient place, that I am also a Transcendent Being. These insights became so important that I wanted to include the work with the Transpersonal within my Voice Dialogue practice in a more deliberate and focused way.

### **The Transpersonal**

Even though the experience of essence is a very specific energetic space for me, it is difficult to talk about. I see it as a natural and accessible part of our being, but there are so many stories, myths and misconceptions associated with it, that I have been reluctant to talk about my experiences and work. In the spiritual texts and traditions it is described as emptiness, enlightenment, oneness, god, essence etc. It is widely believed that we can only attain oneness through intense effort and discipline, years of meditation and seclusion, and that we have to overcome and transcend the ego in order to attain emptiness. There is also the idea that this space is separate from our daily lives and cannot be integrated into an active, involved human existence. Recently there has been a shift in these concepts and especially the Integral movement around Ken Wilber has been developing a much more modern, holistic model. I believe that Voice Dialogue is part of this development and provides an incredibly skilful and elegant process linking personality and essence. This makes it possible to navigate our world with our personality being deeply connected to our internal spiritual reality.

### **Voice Dialogue as a spiritual enquiry**

Once I started to focus on the exploration of the Transcendent within Voice Dialogue I came to realise that Voice Dialogue in itself is a spiritual enquiry. It is a process of 'emptying out'. I acknowledge that all my thoughts, feelings and experiences are just parts of me which I can externalise and dis-identify from. By physically placing them outside of my system and then questioning what remains, I become aware that I don't know who I am and in the absence of my personality I feel empty and filled with a luminous energy at the same time. The process of this 'emptying out' includes all the traditional elements used in spiritual enquiries: mindfulness, awareness, non-judgement, compassion, dis-identification and choicelessness. If I keep following the thread and stay with the process I start to realise that I am all these different energies, but they are also all just parts of my personality. I can watch them and experience them outside of myself, so who is this 'I' that is doing the watching?

This resembles some of the oldest spiritual techniques of self-enquiry to reach enlightenment and it is exciting to recognise that Voice Dialogue can assist people in integrating their transpersonal nature; not by trying to transcend their personality but by deeply exploring and accepting it.

### **Disowned Selves as gateways**

Apart from accessing our Essence through selves that are aligned with the energy, such as the Meditator, Seeker or Higher Self, I also started to notice that it could show up in unexpected places. Often when I was supporting people to work deeply with parts of themselves that had been very disowned, they would experience a profound shift. It seems that if we intentionally and patiently stay within the discomfort of intimately experiencing a disowned self, for example fear, not knowing, grief, aloneness, depression, strong vulnerability etc, a space can open up that is so luminous and expansive that it is unmistakably a spiritual experience. The selves that we are most afraid of can be gateways to our transcendent nature if we allow ourselves to stay with the energy and not move into our usual Primary Selves.

There seem to be similarities in the way we experience the Transcendent. First there is usually a deepening and refining of the senses: sounds may be heard that we usually are too busy to notice; like the wind, birds, our breathing. Everything may look luminous, three-dimensional and the colours are intensified. We might smell things we were not aware of before and feel the breeze touch our skin. Energetically we often feel expansive and without limits, there is no concept of time, the past and the future recede and we are deeply present in the now.

The mind slows down, there are very few thoughts and we tend to not give them much attention. Thoughts come and go but there is no attachment to or rejection of them. We may realise there are no problems right now, even though nothing has changed and nothing needs to. Everything is perfect as it is, including the personality. This is often very profound and surprising within a Voice Dialogue session, especially if we have just talked to the team (Rulemaker, Pusher, Critic) who is spending so much time and effort in improving the personality. The experience often leads to a strong feeling of compassion for the world and especially for the Self. It can be accessed by anyone, even people who have had no prior spiritual background and training. We may recognise that this reality is always available; we just need to relax our intense identification with our personality and re-remember emptiness.

### **Transpersonal Dialogue**

Once I had established that it was possible to include the work with the Transcendent within traditional Voice Dialogue, I experimented with a variety of processes to make this more deliberate. Because the energy is contagious it is possible to induce the experience in the client by connecting with it within myself. I started to extend and ground the energy by asking people to open their eyes, look around the room, connect with me and even walk around and talk. My role as a facilitator is to keep being connected to the spaciousness and notice when they lose that experience. A whole range of parts will try and interrupt, for example the Pleaser who is aware of being watched and wants to do it right, or the Critic that comments on this, the Rational Mind trying to understand what is going on or some kind of Pusher wanting to make sure that the client remembers how to do this again next time. I support the client in being able to stay centred in Presence and let the parts of the personality come and go. This process can be compared to the technique of some of the traditional spiritual approaches, where we talk about being the sky and letting the thoughts that are like clouds drift through without attachment or rejection. Even if the client has experienced the Transpersonal before, this has usually happened when they were alone and inactive. It can be profoundly moving to experience being connected to another person and involved in a conversation whilst grounded in spaciousness.

Before going back to the Aware Ego I usually spend some time brainstorming with the client about ways to remember and access the Transpersonal, such as meditation, being in nature, gardening, listening to certain kinds of music etc. Sometimes it feels awkward and restricting to move back into the Aware Ego, but it is important to take some time at the end of a session to sit between the personality on one side and the Transcendent on the other. Then we can practice bringing both energies in and out, starting to have some choice about the intensity. This gives the client a real sense of being able to introduce the Transpersonal into their daily lives and ground this often very spacious energy.

### **Big Mind Big Heart**

The first time I made my work with the Transpersonal more public was during the 2002 Melbourne gathering with Hal and Sidra Stone. I facilitated a group enquiry around the exploration of the Transpersonal. We shared our experiences facilitating this energy within Voice Dialogue sessions and during the discussion most of us dropped into the energy and experienced a profound connection to Being, stillness and each other. This showed me again how

powerfully energetic and contagious the energy is and how it gets amplified within a group.

I then became interested in Genpo Roshi's Big Mind process. Genpo Roshi is an American Zen master who after doing some work with Hal and Sidra Stone started mixing traditional Zen with elements of Voice Dialogue. After doing some training with Genpo Roshi, I started to use elements of this process in my work.

Even though Big Mind is based on Voice Dialogue, there are a number of significant differences between the two modalities. Unlike Voice Dialogue, Big Mind has a clear agenda and goal: to introduce people to the Transpersonal. The process is usually done in a group, even though it can be used in individual sessions. The selves that are being explored are chosen and elicited by the facilitator and instead of moving to different spaces in the room the participants only move slightly in their chair. And most importantly, Big Mind does not include an Aware Ego Process as its main focus, even though Genpo Roshi introduced The Apex a few years ago, which can be compared to the Aware Ego.

Integrating some of the Big Mind techniques within my Voice Dialogue practice allows me to introduce people very quickly and effectively to the Transpersonal. It enables me to work experientially with groups, not only with the Transcendent but also with general Voice Dialogue material. Because Genpo Roshi comes from a spiritual background, a whole network of people who are usually more interested in transcending the Ego than exploring their personality are introduced to the psychology of Selves. The Integral movement has started to incorporate this work into their curriculum and my hope is that this will accelerate the development of Voice Dialogue on a much wider scale.

### **Training other facilitators**

Once Transpersonal Dialogue became an integrated part of my work, I wanted to include it in my trainings. Even though I realise that not everyone is interested in the Transpersonal, I do feel that it is important for facilitators to at least have some knowledge of and experience and skill with this energy. It is such an amazing resource in reducing some of the trauma and suffering people experience in their intense identification with personality.

We know that it is important as a facilitator to have access to a part in order to be able to facilitate it in any depth. This is especially the case with the transcendent energies, as they are so subtle and refined that their presence can easily be missed. On the other hand, people who are interested in working

with the Transcendent are often unconsciously identified with it. Beingness has become a Primary Self protecting them from the experience of their vulnerability and other parts of their personality. In my trainings I try to take students through some of the work necessary to develop an Aware Ego process in regards to the Transpersonal.

Because the transcendent energy often comes through a deep experience of a Disowned Self, trainees have to become comfortable and confident with working with disowned energies. They have to be able to walk into the jungle whilst holding the Aware Ego Process for the client and themselves.

It also takes some skill to notice the presence of a gateway, being able to intentionally access Beingness and then help the client to keep out interrupting voices and expand the transcendent energy. If inducing and holding the space presents challenges, being able to then connect with the client from emptiness and assist them in grounding the energy is often very confronting. A strong sense of intimacy opens up when we connect in this way with someone and it can be difficult for the facilitator to allow this to happen and be able to hold the impersonality of an Aware Ego at the same time.

The work with the Aware Ego Process at the end of the session is important as well. Trainees need to know how to assist people in bringing in both energies (Personality and Transpersonal) and then consciously release the intense connection that often occurs between facilitator and client in this work.

As with all aspects of facilitating, the personal gains for the trainees are immense. I often teach facilitating to participants even though they will never become facilitators. Learning how to be with another person from an Aware Ego space with mindfulness, non-judgement and total focus, is an incredibly empowering and satisfying skill. And if we can turn this compassionate attention and acceptance towards ourselves, so much of the suffering that is being caused especially by the Critic gets released. Facilitating the Transcendent teaches the trainee to deliberately tune into Beingness within themselves and function in connection with others, without losing this link. Imagine being able to increasingly do this not just in sessions but also in your daily life!

### **Examples of sessions**

#### **Flipping the coin**

My first memory of a session that changed from a typical voice dialogue session into a more Transpersonal format, is from one of the last summer camps with Hal and Sidra Stone in the States. I was on staff, working with

one of the participants. We were exploring an energy that was very dark; he was feeling depressed, disconnected, alone and at odds with himself, the world and god. This was as self he usually did not allow himself to enter into fully; his Primary Self System was more aligned with being positive, light and empowered. We deliberately stayed with this Disowned Self for quite some time until we experienced the fullness of the energy. I then asked him to imagine that this part was just one side of a coin and to allow himself to imagine what would happen, if we flipped the coin. He immediately experienced a profound spiritual expansion. He felt deeply connected to everything, himself, other human beings and the universe. It was a strong experience of essence and oneness.

### **The Critic and the Black Hole**

Here is a more recent example of an individual session. The client was struggling with the voice of the critic harassing him and creating a sense of depression, which he was trying to avoid and overcome. After working with the Critic in-depth, the client moved back into the Aware Ego and explored the physical and energetic effect of the constant analysis and criticism. He became aware of a heaviness and depression, which he called the "black hole".

We then moved into this Disowned Self and he became aware of a strong longing to just stop and give up. Surrendering to this feeling, the energy began to change, he felt like he was sinking down into a different space. It was obvious that this Disowned Self was a gateway to the Transpersonal. Experiencing a total dis-identification from his personality, the client began to feel still, present and awake. We proceeded to deepen the experience of emptiness and depth by using metaphors that he expressed: the feeling that he was underwater and could breathe and relax, the image of the choppy water on the surface and how much time he spent there. He likened that to the identification with the personality, the waves being the thoughts, feelings and body symptoms.

We used a range of other techniques to ground him in this energy. The client had his eyes closed during most of this process. I then invited him to stay connected to the depth of being still and present, whilst communicating with the outside world by opening his eyes, making contact with me and moving around the room.

At the end of the session we came back to the Aware Ego and spent some time moving the two energies in and out, the identification with personality and the energy of presence. We talked about his ability to stay connected to this sense of essence while functioning in the world and how he could integrate this into his daily life.

## **Intimacy**

This group exploration happened in one of my regular advanced training meetings. We were exploring different Primary Selves around the issue of intimacy in relationships. Some people were more consumed with the fear of intimacy, wanting to keep themselves safe by creating a distance to other people. Their Primary Self System protected them by putting up walls, staying impersonal and distant and generally avoiding intimacy. Other participants were more interested in creating intimacy and desperately looking for closeness. They were trying to protect themselves from aloneness and abandonment by pushing for connection, often in a very demanding and intrusive way.

We explored the different Primary Selves and their fears and some of the vulnerability underneath. I then asked the group as a whole to move into the voice of intimacy. They shared one by one how they perceived this energy, deepening and expanding the experience for everyone. We all felt intimately connected to ourselves, each other and the world; the fears of the Primary Self System receded. Intimacy explored in this form revealed itself as an archetypal energy of the Transcendent.

## **The 'gang'**

I work with the Transcendent in Voice Dialogue sessions in a number of ways. Below is one of my favorite techniques:

When we work with the Primary Self System, especially what I call the 'gang' (Rulemaker, Perfectionist, Pusher and Critic), the client often gets a sense of the overwhelming pressure and tightness of this group of selves once they move back to the Aware Ego position. It seems there is no way out. I then ask the client to find an energy that is not affected by this system and they move there. This often connects them to the Transpersonal in a very easy and profound way. As we generally think that it is difficult to intentionally access Essence, experiencing this space just by moving to another physical place can be incredibly empowering.

Once we have shifted into this space, whenever a thought or feeling comes up, I ask the client to check if this belongs to the expanded space of Being or to the personality we just worked with. Usually if it has any firm content it belongs to the personality and I ask the client to let it flow back to the space in the room that is taken up by the group of selves. This allows the experience of the Transcendent to deepen and gives the client another way to learn how to disengage from the Primary Self System. Coming back to the Aware Ego position and learning to be centered between Personality and Essence grounds this experience.

## **The Transcendent in Voice Dialogue**

I have been passionate about the potential of Voice Dialogue to bridge the work with personality and the transpersonal for a long time now. I hope this article has shown how much the inclusion of Transpersonal Dialogue alongside more traditional Voice Dialogue can benefit facilitators and clients.

We can finally make the transcendent aspects of ourselves more accessible in our day-to-day lives, not by trying to overcome our ego but by deeply engaging with parts of our personality and accepting all we find.

Learning how to have direct access to the transpersonal reality provides another clear resource to be able to separate from the often-painful restrictions of our personality and find more peace and joy. It can create deep compassion for others and ourselves and makes it possible to be fully in the world but not of it.

Transpersonal Dialogue can also shine a light on one basic aspect that we all share as human beings; our deeply painful sense of separation. So much of our sense of self has been developed trying to avoid and overcome this experience of separateness. The stories of our wounds and vulnerabilities might be different, the ways we try to hide and overcome them vary; but ultimately when we drop down into our deepest fear and pain, the words we use to describe this reality are very similar. We feel abandoned, alone and separate, we don't think we belong. No matter how hard we try to overcome this feeling and fill the hole, it runs like a deep current underneath our lives and resurfaces again and again. Some of these feelings are linked to traumatic experiences in our childhood and adulthood and can be integrated and held by the Aware Ego process. But even if we do this work the sense of separation remains, we feel alone. And for me this reality of separateness is inherent in being in a body and personality; it is our human condition. From my perspective only a vivid experience of the Transpersonal and the resulting realization of our connectedness and oneness allows us to see that from the soul's perspective separateness is an illusion. Once we have this insight as a true experience and understanding, the identification with our personality and story softens. The Primary Self system so consumed with trying to overcome or distract us from the perceived sense of separateness can relax, we are able to accept and be ourselves and feel compassion and understanding for others. I feel that Voice Dialogue used in this way can become a profoundly transformative practice personally and spiritually.