

Enlightenment Intensive Dyads

Overview

The dyad is a contemplative art. There are a number of contemplative arts you might be familiar with, among them are meditations of various kinds, Vipassana, Zazen, Yoga, Tai Chi, mantra, kirtan, Japanese Cha No Yu (tea ceremony), and many more.

The word "dyad" comes from the Greek word for two. The term is used by many people in various contexts, but we use it to indicate a specific contemplative practice based on two individuals working together.

Ava Berner originated the idea of the dyad as used here, and Charles Berner developed it and introduced it to his students. In 1968 he created the Enlightenment Intensive, modeling it after the Zen Sesshin. Instead of doing Zen meditation, participants would do the dyad.

The dyad combines an inner process, contemplation, with communication to a listening partner. Communicating what comes up from your inner work is a powerful addition to deep introspection, as communicating can clear away mental and emotional obstacles. This allows you to quickly go deeper. As a bonus, by doing dyads you can increase your ability to be open and truthful in all your relating to others.

There is no dogma that you need to believe in. What is taught is a process by which you can find your own truth. Of course there are often valuable benefits from studying wisdom teachings from others—they can help steer a person in the right direction. However, in doing this practice one discovers for themselves what is true.

The Enlightenment Intensive Dyad

There are other areas where we have found dyads beneficial in addition to enlightenment: clearing mental blocks and fixed attitudes, increasing ability, and resolving relationship problems. This paper focuses on the enlightenment dyad.

A *dyad* lasts a fixed length of time, typically 40 minutes. Within the dyad, there are eight dyad cycles. A dyad cycle starts with an instruction and ends with an acknowledgement. A dyad cycle is typically five minutes long.

Before the dyad begins you choose an *instruction* to work on. There are five instructions used in enlightenment dyads:

- Tell me who you are
- Tell me what you are
- Tell me what life is
- Tell me what another is
- Tell me what love is

Sometimes other instructions are used, but these are the main ones.

A newcomer typically starts with “Tell me who you are.” Participants should consult with the master when choosing an instruction.

Select a partner to work with and sit down facing each other. Each partner lets the other know what instruction they will be working on. You stay with the same instruction until you have a breakthrough or substantial change. Each partner can work on a different instruction; they don’t have to match.

One person starts as the *listening* partner, and the other is the *active* partner. The dyad proceeds like this:

- A bell rings and the *listening* partner puts their attention on the active partner and gives them their instruction.
- The *active* partner receives the instruction, enters into contemplation, and then communicates to the listening partner what came up as a result of contemplating.
- The listening partner remains silent and listens without evaluating or passing judgment about what was said. The listener remains fully present, silent, non-reactive and does their best to understand what the active partner says. Even when the active partner is not communicating, the listener keeps their attention on their partner.
- The active partner continues to contemplate and communicate until the 5-minute bell sounds.
- At the bell, the active partner quickly completes their current thought and the listening partner acknowledges by saying “Thank you,” ending that dyad cycle.
- The active and listening partners’ roles then reverse. The new listening partner gives the new active partner their instruction and the process continues.
- After 40 minutes (eight 5-minute periods), a bell rings, ending the dyad.

Basic Agreements for a Dyad

Some meditation traditions advise people not to talk about their deep inner experiences to anyone but the spiritual master. Revealing your inner landscape has its risks—for instance, being invalidated, embarrassed, or ostracized, causing misunderstandings, weirding others out, and so forth. For the dyad to work, the space of the dyad needs a “culture” of social agreements that help to avoid these pitfalls, maximize the benefits, and keep you focused on your own process.

Here are the agreements that help define the culture of the dyad practice:

- The dyad is meant to be a safe place to communicate. In practice, this means that participants refrain from *evaluating* or *passing judgment* on what others say.

Evaluating/passing judgment: good or bad, right or wrong, true or false, I like it or I don't like it, I agree or I don't agree.

Participants honor these constraints to the best of their ability both during the dyad period as well as between dyads. Note that this is more than just hiding or suppressing one's judgments or attitudes. We cultivate the capacity to be nonjudgmental. As the listening partner, you refrain from evaluating and passing judgment in any way, either verbally or non-verbally. You could call this “empty listening.”

- Participants should remain considerate of others, trying their best to be kind-hearted, flexible and tolerant. However, being considerate of others does not mean that you must suppress your emotions when you are the active partner. It is important to communicate your feelings and emotions if they arise from your contemplation. As a listening partner, you cultivate the ability to receive strong emotions or unusual ideas without reacting. You become a *stable* empty listener.
- The active partner does not directly refer to their partner when communicating. For example, you would not say, “I'm having trouble saying this to you” because the “you” directly refers to your listening partner. One might say, in this instance, “I'm having trouble saying this to another.” Broadly speaking, referring to your partner should be seen as a red flag and should be avoided. It is tricky when working on “Tell me what another is.” Instead of saying, “I experience you as a conscious being,” you might say, “My experience of another is that they are a conscious being.” Not referring to your partner keeps you focused on your own process. It's not about them, but your own experience of the other.
- A listening partner should not try to “help” their partner other than by keeping their attention on the active partner in the dyad and listening attentively as they speak. Dyads can bring the active partner to some pretty sensitive places

in their mind and emotions, so it's important for the listening partner to stay present and be open to such things occurring. Both listening and active partners should not attempt to distract or soothe the other. You let the other fully experience what arises.

- Neither the active nor the listening partner should try to *create an effect* on their partner. In particular, active partners should avoid “teaching” or lecturing their listening partner. It's called “laying a trip” when one tries to school their listening partner on the truth as they see it. You should just communicate what comes up for you from your own contemplation. The listening partner does not have to agree with you; they just listen attentively and try to understand.
- Participants should avoid combining their process with their partner's. You honor your own process; they honor theirs. For example, if your partner talks about his mother, you should not start talking about yours simply because they triggered a memory. You try to stay with your own process.
- Participants agree to not share (reveal) what their partners have said after the dyad period ends. Things that are said in the dyad are held as confidential. If you ever do speak about what happened in dyad, you would do so with appropriate respect and carefully preserve the anonymity and privacy of the other. Uphold the safety of the practice. If you feel you need to say something about your partner or their process you should talk to a monitor or the master, not your partner.
- You should put other practices and disciplines aside for the duration of the dyad. The idea is to commit yourself to doing just the dyad practice with full attention, intention and focus.
- Usually the master will set a policy of not talking during the breaks between dyads, as it helps to minimize distractions and supports one another's concentration. There is value in letting go of frivolous communications, making a space, instead, for deep inquiry, reflection, and for the emergence of sacred, profound and transcendent experiences.
- Participants agree to refrain from sexual activity during a dyad event. This doesn't mean one can't talk about sexual matters or that they must suppress sexual energy that might be released by the process (which sometimes occurs). One can communicate their sexual thoughts and views and express sexual energy and feelings if they arise, *but they must avoid acting upon that* with their partners or any other person in the group. They must be very careful not to directly refer to their partner sexually.

The Two Partner Roles

At any particular time, one of the partners is the contemplating/communicating partner. For simplicity we call this one the *active* partner. The other is the *listening* partner.

The two partners sit a comfortable distance apart, either on chairs or cushions. Both partners are on the same level (e.g., not one on a chair and one on a cushion).

The role of the active partner—the active partner uses the instruction to focus their attention. They keep a one-pointed focus on what their instruction points to. They can frame their instruction as a question to themselves to help with their contemplation. For example, “Tell me who you are” becomes “Who am I?”

The active partner then contemplates. Contemplation is thoughtful reflection with an intention to directly know the truth. One thoughtfully reflects on what their instruction points to.

- When working on self enlightenment, the active partner finds what to them is the most real sense of themselves that they have at that moment.
- If they are working on the life question, they find what to them is most real about life as life at that moment. The life question is not just about biological life or living things, but about all of life, from atoms to the cosmos, as well as all thoughts and feelings. However, one can choose an aspect or element of life as long as it represents life.
- The same goes for another and love. The active partner finds something that to them is the most real sense of another or love.

Once one has a focus on what is real to them, they open to an experience of that and become aware of what arises in consciousness when they do that. Whatever arises from contemplating, that is what they communicate to their partner. As ideas, insights, feelings, etc., arise as a result of contemplating, the active partner communicates them to the listening partner.

The active partner should not feel required to communicate something profound or something they believe in. They simply communicate what actually arises from their contemplation.

Contemplation is a persistent and steady thoughtful reflection about something. Implicit in this is an openness to whatever occurs. There is great value to “holding your question” so that your awareness deepens and becomes clear. As a broad average, one should contemplate for at least half of a 5-minute dyad cycle,

though there may be periods when contemplating a lot or talking a lot are appropriate, depending on what is coming up.

Another way of thinking about contemplation is intending to directly experience. By direct experience we mean that the experience is not through a logical process, feelings, or any “means by which” one might experience the object of their contemplation. It is pure, direct union with the truth.

Communicating what came up in contemplation is an important part of the active partner’s process. The mind is cleared when one realizes they are truly understood. When understanding occurs, there is deeper contact with the other, and separation (aloneness) is dissolved. One should not underestimate the power of deep understanding.

The active partner should communicate only what comes up as a result of their contemplation. Participants should discriminate between what came up from contemplating and any related thoughts or stories that one might be drawn to by mental associations.

The active partner keeps the same instruction, using it as a *process* to go deeper. You stay with the same instruction until a change of consciousness occurs and you fully communicate it to your partner. Generally, participants should not change their instruction until they have discussed it with the master.

The role of the listening partner—the listening partner starts the dyad cycle, listens to their partner’s responses, and ends the cycle when the bell rings.

When giving the instruction, the listening partner always uses exactly the same wording—nothing added, nothing left off. Give the instruction in a neutral way, avoiding any temptation to put your own “spin” or energy on it. Give the instruction alive with the meaning of the words, not lifeless, empty sounds or an overly dramatic dramatization.

The listening partner watches and listens to the active partner. When the active partner has something to communicate, the listening partner is right there with their attention on them and receives the communication fully.

The listening partner does not intentionally send any outflows (messages) to the active partner about what they said. You avoid nodding or using other body language to express how you received what your partner said.

The listening partner does not have to agree with what the active partner says. The listening partner can fully receive what their partner says without *agreeing or disagreeing*.

The listening partner does not work on their own instruction during the active partner's turn. The listening partner best supports the active partner by being fully present for them.

The active partner does not need to maintain eye contact with the listening partner, though this sometimes seems to help. The listening partner should keep their eyes on the active partner so that the active partner knows that the listening partner is really *with* them.

At the end of a cycle, the bell rings and the listening partner says, "Thank you" to acknowledge the active partner's efforts and to end the cycle. The listening partner does this without expressing any judgment about the content, showing any approval or disapproval of them or what they said, nor implicitly giving any advice. The active partner can also thank the listening partner if they want.

Change-over: The active and listening roles reverse. The former active partner gives the former listening partner their instruction and the dyad proceeds.

At the end of 40 minutes, the end bell rings signaling that the dyad period is complete.

The Dyad is a Contemplative Art

Usually, when someone wants to be an artist, they collect the tools of their art and give it a try. Over time they find out what paints work best for them, what brushes, canvases, easels, room lighting, and subjects work best. Experienced artists know their tools and have practiced and developed their skills.

Contemplation is an art, of course, so one continually improves, becoming more capable of staying focused, being open, reflecting and taking the contemplation deeper.

Communication is also an art. One becomes more and more clear about what came up in their contemplation, being incisively honest, and ever more skillful in getting what came up fully across to the listening partner.

Empty listening is also an art, and one becomes more able over time to receive whatever their partner says without reacting, judging or pulling back. They become more able to be steadily present and attentive to the active partner.

These skills do not have to stay in the Enlightenment Intensive or dyad evenings. They directly apply to one's life. You can tell if you got them right when you notice that you don't feel confused about who you are, your relationships are thriving, your conversations work better, you're not as reactive, you have confidence that you know what your life is about, and love abounds.

