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## Dialogue: A framework in Upanishad and Buber's thought

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### Abstract

This paper presents two cases of dialogue for teachers to draw inspiration and to be able to achieve the above-mentioned in their classrooms. Both the sources are religious and of distant origins in terms of their cosmology and fundamental beliefs. However, both have a potential to draw inspiration for a teacher's role in a dialogue and for organizing dialogue in a modern classroom. First case is from Upanishad, a sacred text of Hinduism. I have taken the specific case of Katha-Upanishad. Second case that I have taken is from Judaism through the ideas of Jew Philosopher Martin Buber. We need to establish a taxonomy and typology to describe the kinds of relationships into which teacher and students can enter in order to achieve higher goals of learning and growth. The instances of Katha-Upanishad and Buber stress the mutual and holistic existence of teachers and students in a forever dialogue.

**Keywords:** Dialogue, Buber, Katha-Upanishad, teacher-student relationship

### Introduction

For schooling to become dynamic and a constantly unfolding process, teachers need to be drawn into creative processes. The monological transmission of knowledge must be recognized by educators as the negation of the process of school. Education as a process represents the coming together of a teacher and students who should be asking questions and seeking answers while learning about themselves, others around them and the larger world. It is in this process of being together in asking questions and seeking answers that a teacher and students gain an understanding of each other in a relationship and of the world as knowledge. However, the quality of this learning relationship depends on the quality of the questions asked, openness of the questioner and the process of seeking answers or arriving at them. This kind of interaction has been termed as dialogue in educational theory. In contemporary world, dialogue has been described by Friere (1992/2014) as "the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study" (p. 100) Dialogic inquiry is situated in the culture, language, politics, and themes of the students. However, this kind of inquiry does not merely exploit or endorse the given but seeks to transcend it. Freire (Shor and Freire 1987) <sup>[13]</sup> makes clear that a true dialogue is always an inquiry. There is an implied challenge, a refusal to accept the given which makes the process of dialogue and inquiry an emancipatory one. We step back from the situation in order to see it more clearly, and to judge it. In a true dialogue, a teacher enables his/her students to do precisely this. It is really this kind of challenge and the possibility of emancipation implied in the process which prevents some teachers from doing a dialogue with the students while learning complex ideas about this world. If teachers want to engage in genuine dialogue with their students, they have to be prepared for responses as well as questions which are unpredictable, challenging, and transformative. The function of a teacher is to organize or create concrete situations out of the "forms of the curriculum" which invite the engaged, yet critical thoughts and actions of the students. An educational dialogue with the power to transform the curriculum into a spontaneous and dynamic process, which can ensure learning is inevitably based on themes meaningful and relevant to the students and to the world. McLaren, (1988) argued that a pedagogy which elicits dynamic forms of participation positively resonates with "the dreams, desires, voices and Utopian longings" (p. 168) of the students.

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Teachers who use dialogue in the classroom need to provide an ethos, an enabling space that welcomes exploration and risk-taking (Eisner 1985, p. 118) and the ability to persist with the inquiry. For this, a teacher is required to have flexibility, ingenuity, personal creativity, and an ability to exploit opportunities as they occur in the classroom. To carry out the kind of teaching which is transformative and dialogic, the teacher needs curiosity, the ability to be focussed and critically reflective, the strength to cope with uneasiness, uncertainty, and unpredictability, and considerable tolerance of ambiguity.

This paper presents two cases of dialogue for teachers to draw inspiration and to be able to achieve the above-mentioned in their classrooms. Both the sources are religious and of distant origins in terms of their cosmology and fundamental beliefs. However, both have a potential to draw inspiration for a teacher's role in a dialogue and for organizing dialogue in a modern classroom. First case is from Upanishad, a sacred text of Hinduism. I have taken the specific case of Katha-Upanishad. Second case that I have taken is from Judaism through the ideas of Jew Philosopher Martin Buber.

Fundamental to a meaningful dialogue is the notion of critical consciousness. A dialogue between two people can give rise to critical consciousness when it fosters a capacity for critical judgment. Its strength comes to the fore when the dialoguers perceive reality as an unfolding, graspable process, rooted in the day-to-day actions and thoughts of real people. The continuing transformation of reality, the refutation of education as a static rather than dynamic process, demands that both teachers and students become masters of their own thinking and a teacher can achieve this through the medium of dialogue. By approaching each other with a productive, critical stance, previously held inert ideas are thrown into fresh combinations and open up a wide range of new possibilities. The value of an educational dialogue lies in its merit that it can foster the development of a critical consciousness that will look at the world as entity to be transformed rather than passively endured. The mark of a successful teacher is not just the ability to dialogue in a mode of reciprocity, but also to recognize the dignity of solidarity and trust in human relationships. The idea that all people, whether students or teacher merit respect and concern should fuel the atmosphere for a constructive dialogue in every classroom. Only by virtue of faith and trust does dialogue have any meaning; only when people are linked together by mutual respect and hope can they join in a critical search for a new beginning. Once teachers are able to recognize that how we relate to one another represents the essence of what we say as knowledge, they will be able to give meaning to the learners experience in the classroom setting. A dialogue between student and teacher should be considered as an essential feature in an ideal classroom, where students develop significant inquiry when given the space and time to reflect individually and in collaboration and to wonder and ask original questions. As much as possible, students get the autonomy to co-create a collaborative environment where they are both the learners and 'askers' and are comfortable assuming both roles. It is for this goal that I find the story of Nachiketa in Katha-Upanishad and the ideas of Buber chiefly meaningful. Their cases are presented one by one for their educational implications in a modern classroom followed by a conclusive discussion.

### **Dialogue between Nachiketa and Lord Yama**

In Upanishad, the Sanskrit texts of Hindu philosophy, a dialogue between a young boy and a powerful god of death has been presented. The Katha-Upanishad presents a remarkably creative dialogue between Yama, the god of Death, and Nachiketa, who seeks an understanding of the self's status after death. At a very young age, Nachiketa had left his home in search of the meaning of death and beyond. He has been presented as a true seeker of knowledge concerning the ultimate truth of life. Nachiketa, a young boy, extorts from Death (god) "the disclosure of a ceremonial rite that renders one immortal in heaven, and then follows it up with an inquiry whether there is another world and another life" (Whitney, 1890; p.91) <sup>[16]</sup>. Katha-Upanishad is an interesting text because of the language, style and humour in it. It assumes the quality of a literary piece in which Yama emerges as a teacher who challenges Nachiketa, tries to dissuade him from reaching on the truths and then finally, offers what he was seeking. Yama's responses to Nachiketa's questions give an interesting format to be interpreted in the modern educational theory for what a teacher's role should be and can be.

Yama doesn't answer Nachiketa's questions instantly who poses three fundamental queries about life. He takes the knowledge seeker through different routes of thinking so as to enable him to be persistent and keen to get knowledge. In the process, the real joy of deep meaning acquires centre-stage. Coming from a religious context, Yama presents the ideal of a teacher who has depth in his personality, a view of where the learner (knowledge seeker) has to reach and how should the teacher take him there. This model of gradual manoeuvring and challenging the learner to think more deeply and demand knowledge is very different from the modern-day construction of a teacher who should work with an idea of immediacy towards learner's needs. The story of Yama as a teacher has a great potential to awaken the image of a real teacher and the extent of his/her potential in leading the learner towards greatest and deepest knowledge.

Nachiketa requests the Yama to give an explanation of the self's status after death. However, Yama, attempts to evade the query and points to the subtlety of the knowledge that Nachiketa wanted to grasp. He offers a replacement boon: "Choose sons and grandsons who may live a hundred years, choose herds of cattle, choose elephants and gold and horses, choose the wide expanded earth, and live thyself as many years thou listeth." Yama offers a life full of desires and their fulfilment. However, Nachiketa refuses and remains firm that he seeks only the answers. In this complex exchange of ideas, Yama, as a teacher, describes the value of the life of knowledge and the true meaning of wisdom. Nachiketa's third enquiry entails instruction in a knowledge beyond the issues of the heavenly worlds. He wants an insight which is not easy to grasp and is too subtle to be caught. It seeks to penetrate the mystery of repeated life and death. Their dialogue emerges as a device which not only sets the stage and rivets the attention for the Upanishadic teaching to follow, but its structure is reflective of the very essential method of inquiry into the absolute truth that the Upanishads seek to inculcate (Lipner, 1978) <sup>[10]</sup>. Katha Upanishad, if read from the lens of its pedagogic character, offers an instance of what can be achieved in terms of highest knowledge through a dialogue, Upanishadic dialogue.

One can draw the parallels with the narrative of Plato (380 BC), far away from India in the land of Greece. Plato's idea of a teacher was that of somebody who can facilitate learning about the world and thinking however, the onus of seeking knowledge falls on the student, just like Yama nudged Nachiketa to go on and on as a true seeker of knowledge. While the framing of the dialogue in the Katha Upanishad certainly differs from that of the Gorgias, a similar challenge is presented in it too. For Plato and as conceptualised in Upanishads, there must be a prudent measure of commensurability between student and teacher, where both seek to attain the same understanding and knowledge. In this conceptualization, genuine learning requires the desire to know and a teacher's role is to keep igniting that fire or curiosity to go on further. Knowledge and virtue constitute two dominant themes in Plato's dialogues in which teacher plays the role of a facilitator to achieve highest forms of learning. In the *Meno*, Socrates and Meno discuss the question whether a teacher can teach virtue to a student and they arrive at a positive realization. Plato's own life is a model of what a teacher can achieve just as his teacher Socrates achieved in the form of Plato as a follower (student in today's discourse). The role of dialectic or 'learning in a dialogic relationship' in Plato's thought is important and a teacher plays the role of the person who teaches reasoning and a method of intuition by participating in it (Edith, 1961).

"In the Platonic and Upanishadic texts, a cluster of essential questions are raised. What should we pursue in life? Are there good reasons and/or solid arguments that favor the choice of the self-controlled life of wisdom over the life spent in pursuit of sensual desires?" (Schiltz, 2006, p.452)  
<sup>[12]</sup> The construction of teacher-student interaction for acquiring advanced level knowledge in Katha-Upanishad and Plato's dialogues take us in the same direction. In both of them, it is the knowledge seeker or the learner who asks questions not the teacher as has become a practice in the contemporary education systems. Today's teachers think of student's questions only at the end of their teaching as an exercise to revise or clarify but rarely to invite original inquiries of their learners as was conceptualised in these two classics of the world.

### Martin Buber's Dialogue

Distant in time, Buber (1923 & 1947) took us in the realm of teacher as somebody who establishes an ongoing dialogue with his student, conceptualised as *I and Thou*. Inspired by the religious ideas of Hasidism, Buber proclaims that teaching is foremost being in relation. He presupposed that the human being, in its fundamental nature, is homo dialogus; that one is incapable of realizing himself without communion with others and that should be the fundamental in shaping the axis of teacher-student relationship. A Buberian teacher is defined as *homo religiosus*, who believes that love of (pupil) humanity leads to the love of God, and vice versa. The concept of 'inclusion' in the educational context is one of Buber's major contributions. Inclusion, according to Buber, means the ability to develop a dual sensation among those engaged in dialogue: experiencing oneself and simultaneously perceiving the 'other' in its singularity. He considered this as a frame for teacher-student relationship. The inclusion of a teacher causes one to 'know' one's fellow human, learner in this case, both physically and spiritually, in the Biblical sense of

'knowing' a person. He described the basic conditions needed for communication in asymmetric settings, such as the classroom, as an event experienced by teacher and learner together. The hierarchical status between the teacher as an authoritative person and the dependent student demands not only closeness but distance as well. Buber warns that teachers who become over-involved emotionally with their students lose their self-awareness and forfeit their dominant status. The noble work of the teacher is to be mindful to his students, in order not to 'mismatch' the graced occasions of dialogue, with the student.

In Buberian construction, dialogue requires two basic conditions: autonomous partners and a free choice by both of them to enter into relations. These demands contrast sharply with the educational set up based on the pupils' dependency on their teacher. The schoolroom is characterized by impossibility of mutuality—being dominated by teacher's authority upon the children the inferior status of the learners leads them to relinquish their own desires and impulses and accept the choice of the teacher (Yaron, 1990)<sup>[17]</sup>. Moreover, the curriculum is prescribed by the school authorities in contradiction to the ethos of liberty required by dialogue. The teacher does not select his/her pupils, similarly students do not choose their teacher. Despite the apparent hierarchic relationship, a necessary characteristic of the educational setting, Buber considers the pedagogical realm to be entirely dialogical. Buber felt that the lack of mutuality in education can be bridged through one-sided inclusion by the teacher. The teacher must stand simultaneously at the two poles of the education scene: his own and the student's. While the educator is capable of apprehending his student's existence, the latter should comprehend the complexity of the teacher's personality. The teacher should be able to reality of his learner in every moment of understanding to be able to feel what the student feels. For Buber, this is a deep dialogue between a teacher and his student which ensures true learning. Buber visualised the exemplary teacher in the image of the Hasidic leader—the Zaddik: 'who did whatever he did adequately, and whose main teaching was in that he enabled his pupils to participate in his life, and thus became acquainted with the secret of his work'. At the same time, he warned against the teacher's tendency to impose himself upon his pupils, which threatens to paralyze their integral growth.

Buber conceptualizes dialogue as a process through which, a teacher achieves a real 'meeting' with the learner in which the growth of the learner comes through. His frame of I-Thou relationship is marked by mutuality between the teacher and learner. He wants the teacher to acknowledge and accept that he exists because his learners consider him to exist as their teachers. This acceptance can make the teacher realise his identity and purpose in communion with the learner rather than a completely external plan. This, for Buber, constitutes an ongoing dialogue between a teacher and his student at a subtle and deeper level of existence rather than an exchange of few spoken words. It makes the basis for knowledge through dialogue in a relationship.

Buber warns against bringing in equality and mutuality of friendship in a teacher learner dialogue. He says that this relationship-dialogue is of specific character and requires a very different kind of inclusiveness. The essential asymmetry must be maintained so that the teacher continually makes an effort to access the real needs of the

learner by feeling them and at the same time, the learner doesn't feel exactly like the teacher and maintains a desire to learn and be influenced by the teacher. It is this description of a dialogue as a constant inter-being between a teacher and his learner, in which the teacher manoeuvres the direction and pace of experiences, learning and knowledge, is what makes it relevant for the contemporary teacher as an ideal. It is through Buber's I-Thou approach that a teacher can teach his students how to experience the world to seek knowledge and in what terms should they think about it.

According to Guilherme and Morgan (2009) <sup>[8]</sup>, For Buber, education based on dialogue is one that places appropriate weight on both the teacher's influence and on the student's capacities, interests and needs. The role of the teacher is to set the curriculum and the framework, and in doing so, the teacher sets a sort of value platform for the student, but this does not mean that the student's interests, creativity and needs are set aside, as the student develops these within the framework set by the teacher—this is now an aspect of educational theory and practice that is widespread among educators, which perhaps demonstrates Buber's influence in the field of education. (p.568).

According to Alexander (2006) <sup>[11]</sup>, dialogue is for collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful. Students and teachers embark on joint endeavours, have to share ideas and viewpoints, and, building on others' ideas, make moves towards each other in the creation of a product, a shared understanding. Stern (2006, 2009) <sup>[14]</sup> characterises the role of dialogue, in Buber's terms, by noting that such dialogue often lies at the heart of teaching. It sits very naturally as part of the common element of a classroom. Casetli (2017) <sup>[5]</sup> too emphasises the power of dialogue for delivering good education. He argues that dialogue asks the pupils to place the knowledge in a specific context in order to use it to engage with the other who resides within this context.' (144) Although Castelli characterises dialogue as engagement with the other, in a way that resonates with an I-Thou approach, the knowledge is brought to that dialogue, not created by it.

### **Implications of Buber and Katha-Upanishad for Today's Teacher**

In a true educational setting, teacher and students need to learn from each other, and from each their cultural traditions. The above presented brief summaries of Katha-Upanishad and Buber's thought argue a strong case in favour of accessing spiritual and literary texts to draw inspiration for a modern classroom.

We learn from Katha-Upanishad and Buber that the essence of relationship between teacher and pupil is 'dialogic'. It brings them together in an exchange embodied in human language and feelings. They emerge as a guiding frame of how should a teacher relate with his/her learners. The pattern discerned in the famous dialogues discussed above can be schematically presented as follows:

1. The initial situation of learning may often be created by a request when a teacher or a learner present a challenge in more or less explicit form.
2. The responses get elicited from other students as well as the teacher.
3. The teacher instructs, commands, poses further challenges, nudges the learner to think to pursue the request and remain stimulated about it.

It is also possible an important topic may be initiated by a student's observation or question which, at first, appears tangential to the teacher's prepared lesson, but it has the potential to be taken seriously. The teacher can use such a question or observation as an entry point into a dialogic situation where the learner/s participate in the core enquiry and get seriously involved in unravelling the truth. The teacher will be able to fulfil his larger goal of making every learner capable of pursuing an independent enquiry. S/he may be able to illuminate the situation by means of an anecdote, some statistics, reading material, case studies, experiments and so on.

More than challenging the individual students to make an individual response, a teacher inspired by Katha-Upanishad and Buber nudges them to make an 'engaged' statement. There may result an awareness among the learners that a new stage in the grasping of knowledge as truth has been reached. Thus, even a topic which emerges in a casual way can lead to a meaningful dialogue and a profound learning situation.

The discussion has been presented here to establish dialogue as a broad concept in the scope of its implications as well as relevance in education. A fine dialogue can be an encounter between a teacher and his/her learners with diverse values, needs, and orientations but engaged in the collective goal learning and achieving their individual and social growth. I have tried to present "dialogue" basically as an approach, an attitude, a value orientation for teachers. Between a teacher and students, dialogue unfolds as a qualitative expression of human relationships, strengthening concurrently the presupposition that it is ultimately the quality of their relationship in a teaching-learning situation which is the basic need in achieving the learning and growth of the persons involved. Taken as an approach, the dialogic situation facilitates a learning-teaching process between "meanings": teacher and learners bearing unique significance, in which each of them learns from, and teaches, one another and arrive at a deeper meaning in the knowledge they pursue together. In dialogue, each side assumes the role of a learner as well as a teacher, with due respect and appreciation from others for his unique experience and resourcefulness. In such a relationship between learning and teaching, there is not a dichotomy of either /or. Instead, the dichotomy is replaced with and/both. The teacher as well the student become a source of facilitation of his own and another's learning: learning and teaching converging into a diversely expressed common process. The teacher evolves into a deeper being rather than limiting his/her self to the behaviour or outwardly attributes of the learner. There is a genuine regard for student as an individual, as well as a member of a social group. Larger values, appreciation of uniqueness, sharing, equality, cooperation, and reciprocity begin to characterize the teaching of teacher who takes dialogue as an approach like Lord Yama or Buber.

Dewey (1916) emphasized the dialogic relationship in the learning- teaching process. He emphasised the dialogic relationship as an essential element of teaching learning setting.

Participation, sharing, in an activity. In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher - and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction. (p.160)

In the following passage, Moustakas (1972) <sup>[11]</sup> has offered a profound insight into the depth of humanness that permeates the dialogue between student and teacher:

In the situation which is a true occasion for learning, the teacher also becomes a learner. He cannot enable another person to grow unless the process he initiates also affects him. He learns from listening, in the full human sense, to the vital and significant experiences of each individual in his group. He discovers within each situation its unique and special qualities. Within the context of a concrete living situation, the teacher comes to understand the nature of a particular person's experience. It is in the particular experience that potential insights and meanings exist (Moustakas, 1972; p 171-172) <sup>[11]</sup>.

These ideas help us to realise that we need to establish a taxonomy and typology to describe the kinds of relationships into which teacher and students can enter in order to achieve higher goals of learning and growth. The instances of Katha-Upanishad and Buber stress the mutual and holistic existence of teachers and students in a forever dialogue. A true dialogue cannot be structured. It lacks proper structure and content because infinity and universality of knowledge and growth should form the basis of teacher-student relation. When two free persons encounter each other in an educative dialogue and recognize each other as respectable, then an infinite number of meaningful and dynamic situations may be established in their relationship and contribute some original knowledge to the world just as Lord Yama and Nachiketa did.

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