



Reflections on Insight Dialogue with an Amaryllis Plant in the Depth of Winter

by Janet Surrey

These reflections are based on relational meditation (Insight Dialogue) with an Amaryllis bulb and plant (which I will call a "plant-being") in the dark, cold Northeast US this past winter. The bulb was a Christmas gift; it eventually produced three very hardy stems and 12 magnificent, brilliant red flowers. The reflections grew out of intentional Insight Dialogue practice over three sessions: during the emergence of the stems; the flowering and dying; and finally, the growth of beautiful huge green leaves portending new life in the next year.

This was a particularly difficult winter for me. I had a terrible fracture of a bone in my left foot, and there was significant pain, isolation, and immobilization as I was healing and relearning to walk. The condition of suffering likely helped open my mind and heart to the spiritual befriending of this beautiful plant-being — and thus, to open the dialogue and receive its wisdom.

For the past decade, my practice has been the relational meditation practice of Insight Dialogue (ID). With silent internal practice as the foundation, ID opens practice into the external and relational field, while also including and sustaining the internal, ultimately growing into spacious

awareness holding all. Insight Dialogue, developed by Gregory Kramer and others over the past few decades, is a very young practice though it is grounded in the Buddha dharma. It follows the Satipatthana Sutta refrain, which instructs that mindfulness be established in the four foundations of body, feeling, mind, and dhammas, internally, externally, and both internally and externally.

We know the unwholesome and harmful dimensions of relationships that create suffering, yet we also know their healing and transformational potential. ID utilizes the unique potential of human relationality to amplify intentionally shared mind states that incline toward the wholesome and shared liberation. It also includes the power of the human voice and speech, which, as the Buddha embodied and taught, can be the voice of transmission and, along with wise attention, a condition for the arising of right view. The arising of spiritual friendship (*kalyana mitta*) and deep relational contact cultivated in ID make possible a radical relationality, and from within this space, the emergence and cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and liberative insight.

Most ID retreats include some silent meditation in nature but draw primarily on the human-to-human relation. However, ID can also be cultivated with other-than-human beings, expanding relational practice, extending spiritual friendship to all beings, and receiving and sharing dharma wisdom with them.

The practice I describe below arose naturally in my regular daily interconnection with the amaryllis plant-being who "agreed" to dialogue with me; I made the request with care and proceeded mindfully. The practice grew in intentionality and depth of mindfulness and concentration as I drew on the meditation guidelines of ID practice. The six guidelines of ID cultivate a shared ethical and contemplative practice to benefit self, other, and all beings, and to foster depth of dharma investigation. They are:

PAUSE,
RELAX-RECEIVE,
OPEN,
ATTUNE TO PRESENT MOMENT EMERGENCE,
LISTEN DEEPLY,
and SPEAK THE TRUTH.

REFLECTION ONE: **How do plants make decisions?**

This reflection grew out of simply observing the plant over time, noticing one stem emerging first from the soil, bursting with energy and confidence, reaching outward and upwards, upright, very green, straight, and strong. This first stem grew quickly to about four inches and then suddenly stopped growing. As I felt the plant in "pause," my interest and attention began to heighten. I paused with the plant. At first, I was concerned that something was wrong, but as I relaxed, I began to appreciate its teaching on cultivating patience with not knowing, and felt a gentle invitation to dialogue.

I then began to practice with the Insight Dialogue guidelines. PAUSE: stopping and pausing habitual bodily and mental activity, coming home to this moment, honoring the plant with an intention of non-harming, giving it my full attention. RELAX: taking a few deep breaths, releasing tension, relaxing any holding or grasping, and releasing clinging. OPEN: opening to being in relation, to seeing with and learning from, while flowing between a wide, spacious awareness and a more narrow, focused awareness, between the internal and external. ATTUNING TO EMERGENCE: attuning to moment to moment change with all my senses engaged. LISTEN DEEPLY: fully embodied listening to a different form of life, speaking in a different language, attending to its seemingly unbridgeable otherness with great curiosity, care, and tenderness.

A few days later, a second stem popped up exuberantly from the other side of the planter, growing upright very quickly

until it grew higher than the first. Then it too just stopped. Finally, a third stem grew up in the middle of the pot. It grew higher and higher, steadily upright, until it was even higher than the first two. It grew almost (but not quite) quickly enough for me to see, with my limited capacity, all the small changes. Ah! This was the stem to first bud, and when it did, the second stem grew to meet it, and finally, the third. Each stem bloomed with four magnificent, brilliant red flowers with yellow and white borders, one at a time, then with two stems overlapping, and the last four flowers bloomed in their own time. As they were at eye level for me, there was a sense of coming face to face with the exquisite beauty in the small details of the “face” of the flowers.

When all the buds had finally emerged and flowered, I began my practice of dharma contemplation with the question:

Jan Surrey (JS): “How do you make decisions, decisions about how and where to grow, about which stem comes first, which flowers first? How did each stem know when to grow and when to stop?”

Amaryllis Plant-Being (APB): “We make decisions based on the whole, not just each stem on its own, for itself, but always as part of the whole, each surrendering to the highest benefit, the good of the whole.”

JS: “How do you know how to do this?”

APB: “It’s just aligning with natural law. Each stem is part of a whole emergent being, which is interconnected with all beings and conditions. We simply turn toward life, toward what best sustains life, toward the wholesome, with all parts included. Humans know this too, if you could remember who you really are, interconnected with all.”

Pausing and bowing, I do hear these words in my language. I do understand and am able to receive the words into the depths

of my body, heart and mind, with great gratitude. Are they my own words? Or are they received from the plant, or from our relation to each other? I'm not sure, but there is a definite sense of being in the presence of another being, beyond the human, yet a message that can be translated into words that I can hear...

REFLECTION TWO:

What's it like to be unable to move about?

As I spent more time in meditation with the plant-being, we grew to be more related as *kalyana mitta*, spiritual friends in the dharma. By that, I mean that there seemed, at least on my side, to be more "knowing," more respect, more passionate interest, curiosity, and care for the nature and the happiness of the plant. Was there mutuality? Do plants love? I experienced the plant as compassionate and caring in our contemplations.

As I look back, I see that this question about mobility may have arisen out of my distress at my own difficulty walking as I was recovering from my fracture.

Pausing, relaxing, opening to receive, opening to the quiet of the plant-being whose flowers had now reached their fullness and were starting to show signs of wilting and dying. Attuning to emergence, to flowering, to change, to arising and to vanishing. After its flowers died, the plant was still alive, and began to sprout green leaves at the base of its juicy stems. Attuning to emergence and the natural dharma of the plant-being, I formed the words to speak my question out loud.

JS: "What's it like to be unable to move?"

APB: "I am alive and moving in so many ways and through so many forms. The flowers come and go. The movement of life is happening everywhere in us, on a micro and macro level, growing, breathing, reaching, touching, sensing, connecting, arising and vanishing, someways visible to you humans, and someways invisible to your senses."

APB: "There is a deep stillness in the movement itself, beyond birth and death, the birthless and the deathless. Can you know that too?"

JS: "In some moments. But how is it to not be able to walk around, from one place to another, to be landlocked?"

APB: "You are such a *human* being, seeing from your own limited, self-centered perspective- through your own perceptual and conceptual lenses. I might ask you what it's like to roam, to wander about feeling uprooted, always seeking an anchor, always looking for home."

JS: "Yes, I see. Always the limitation of self-view. Can there ever be freedom from fixed views? I yearn..."

APB: "You feel uprooted, wandering, always seeking home, belonging. But in reality, you are already rooted, home on the earth, one of us, held in the web of all beings, part of the matter and energy of the whole earth, the whole cosmos, all micro and macro worlds within worlds."

I am still. I pause to allow these words to penetrate into deep communion, to be embodied, embedded, enfolded into my body/heart/mind.

REFLECTION THREE: Does the plant have a soul?

Watching the flowers "die" and the beautiful long green leaves fan out from the bulb, I begin to wonder about the mover, the decider, the wise one, who or what is directing, intending, choreographing all this unfolding.

JS: "Is there a 'self,' even a soul of the plant-being?"

Here grows a Pause, the deep receptivity of Relax, Opening to what is emerging in the relation, in its own time, Attuning and deep listening, all senses alive and engaged. Internally, silently and then physically, in my human voice, I ask the question, and Listen Deeply to “hear” the wisdom, the intelligence of the plant-being unfolding, speaking in its own way,

APB: “Another human question. There is nothing beyond what the genes carry, their unfolding in relation to all the conditions, even with the other beings in this house, the other plants, and animals, the air you are breathing with all beings, even your care and attuned attention, right here, right now is part of all conditions. All is unfolding together, no separate one, no immortal one, no unmoved mover, only this interrelated energy of the precious life force.”

JS: “Who are you then?”

APB: “The voice of the wholeness, through this particular form of this plant-being, just like you.”

APB: “Yes, it is a miracle to behold! That is true; it’s just not a soul!”

JS: "I bow to you in great appreciation for sharing your wisdom, your dharma. Through deep respect and dialogue, I have awakened to true friendship with you. I humbly offer my care and service to you in whatever way that will unfold. I will record and share these dialogues with all beings, without exception."

REFLECTION FOUR: Emergent Addendum; The Unexpected Fruit of These Dialogues

Later in the year, in spring, I was on an Insight Dialogue retreat at BCBS, and in the midst of a dharma contemplation of the Metta Sutta, I suddenly heard this sutta in the voice of all beings. From the Buddha in human form, as a teacher of humans, but also in the voices of all other-than-human beings: plants, animals, stars, mountains, water and the Earth herself/itself expressing the wisdom of the whole, of all beings, everywhere. The sutta gives instructions to humans on how to live in full interrelatedness with all, in wholesome peace and harmony, as one species among others, as a participant in the flow of life, of dana, and of metta.

Can you hear these words in the voices of all beings? As loving guidance to us humans? LISTEN DEEPLY....

This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.

Peaceful and calm and wise and skillful,
Not proud or demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living being there may be
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none.

The great or the mighty, medium short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near or far away.
Those born and to-be-born--
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life,
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;

Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,

Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.

This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

(Amaravati Sangha translation from the Suta-nipata)

Insight Dialogue with an Amaryllis Plant

I bow in humility. I bow in gratitude. I bow to the real world of metta, dana, and peace. I am grateful for this human possibility, for deep listening and for receiving the wisdom of the natural world.

May we listen.

May there be peace.