

Portrait of Georg Kuehlewind  
Dan Marshall

## **Meditation and Community: An Interview with Georg Kühlewind / Geoff Swaebe**

**GS:** Georg, we live with a strong sense of separation from one another. Can concentration exercises and meditation offer us a bridge?

**GK:** Yes, in two ways. In concentration and, even more in meditation, our consciousness leaves behind the bodily support of the brain. And, in leaving behind the brain, we lift our consciousness into a common air and lessen the “me-feeling” or, in other words, the egotism that separates us from each other, from the spiritual world, from nature, and so on.

Meditating together in one room also helps us to get beyond our sense perceptions so that we can begin to visualize each other as spiritual beings. And experiencing the person beside me as a spiritual being is just about the only way to build community today, without giving up individuality.

**GS:** How would such community differ from what normally passes for community?

**GK:** In everyday life there are unions, parties, clubs, and other kinds of groups that are held together by common interests, but not by real community. A real community is always a spiritual community. Such a community cannot be based on our everyday consciousness and our very private brains. It can only be achieved when our consciousness lifts us above the everyday thinking that separates us from each other. Religious communities have never been based on brain-bound thinking; they are founded upon something much higher in our spiritual being.

In exercising together, we work to overcome our false individualistic striving. At first, the presence of others disturbs us, precisely because of this kind of egotism. But once this phase of disturbance is overcome, there is a sense of mutual help. Everyone I work with reports that concentration and meditation are much easier in a group than when they work alone. This suggests to me that the spiritual world offers more assistance to people working together than to someone working alone.

**GS:** The meditation groups that you work with tend to follow some informal rules of practice. The

participants might begin with a focused discussion on a meditative theme or text and then select a particular phrase to meditate on. While silently pondering the theme, a meditative state may occur. Afterwards, each person reports on their pondering and meditation while the others listen attentively. Is such a structure important to group work?

**GK:** Some sort of structure is necessary at first. And, although the pondering may be superfluous for those who master meditation, it serves to exhaust thinking, which would otherwise interfere with meditation.

**GS:** You try to exhaust the associative tendency in thinking?

**GK:** No. You try to exhaust thinking itself, because meditation doesn't consist of thinking; it consists of concentration on the theme and, the stronger the concentration, the more intensive the attentiveness.

This leads to a moment of emptiness, when the theme changes its form, and a new meaning or understanding shines through. Thinking makes inner noise and a new understanding of the meditative theme cannot happen when inner noise is present.

**GS:** In group practice, people often report that they “never got beyond pondering.”

**GK:** In the beginning the reports are about difficulties. By the way, someone who doesn't want to report needn't do so but, when we report, we mainly report on the pondering. After the meditation, there is often a new after-pondering about putting the meditative experience into words, but true meditation is beyond words and cannot be reported as an informational description. Sometimes we can express it through a new meditative sentence, and that can be the starting point for a subsequent meditation.

**GS:** Can the pondering also be significant?

**GK:** Yes. Any new idea is really a homeopathically short meditation. Our whole meditation praxis would be hopeless if these small meditative experiences did not exist in every new understanding or idea. The flash is usually so short that we don't expe-

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rience it. But, when such a flash is sustained for a time, we call it meditation. The faculty to understand something new is like the little piece of real gold that, in alchemy, changes other metals into gold.

**GS:** Are group meditative practices fragile?

**GK:** Not in my experience. If someone decides to participate after the procedure has been fully explained, I don't see a need for concern.

**GS:** What is it about group meditative work that encourages community —the reporting process or the mutual encouragement of the participants in the discipline of inner work?

**GK:** The main force is the meditating itself but, in reporting, we show trust, which also helps.

**GS:** Is it difficult to develop such trust?

**GK:** When people meditate together, a distinctive, spiritual acquaintance forms and mutual trust is based on this relationship. Everyday connections, such as simple friendships, are transformed, or temporarily forgotten. That's why newcomers who have no connection with anyone in the group can be accepted so easily.

**GS:** So group practice fosters a new spiritual relationship between "I beings?"

**GK:** Every human being is an "I being". But we have to distinguish which "I" we mean. Usually we

mean our lower, egotistic ego, which works to keep things out; to maintain its own boundaries. Whereas, the true "I," or self, is transparent. It has no boundaries and, yet, it doesn't lose its individuality within a union. Similarly, two meanings, not being physical, have no physical limits; they retain their individuality, but they are not separate.

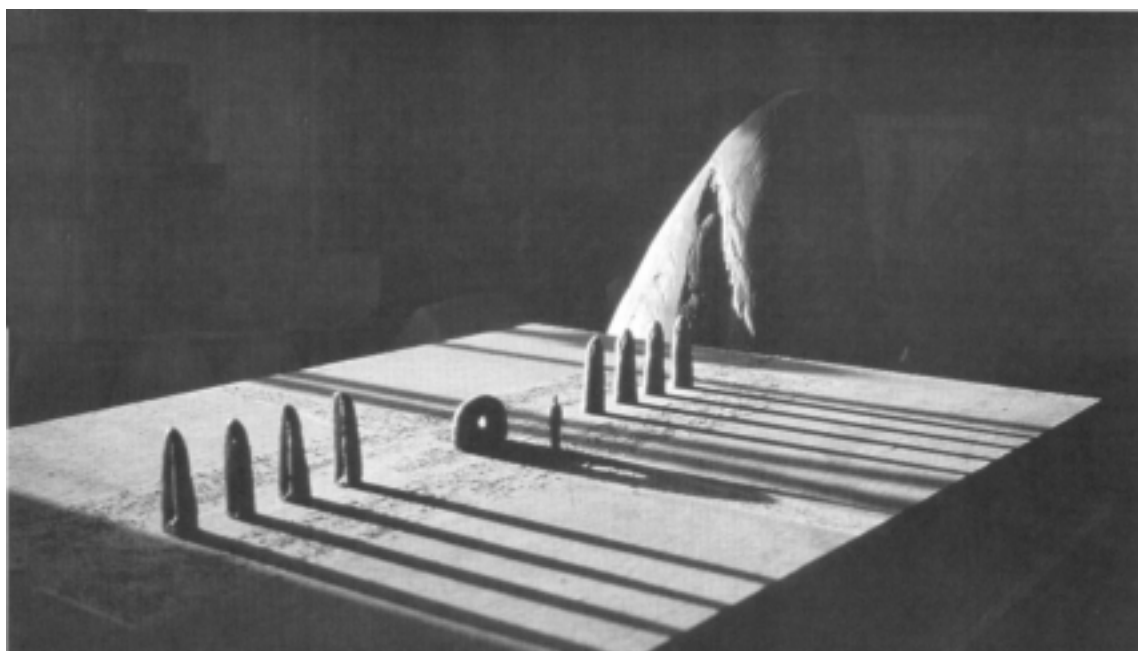
**GS:** Is this analogous to the voices in a choir?

**GK:** It is absolutely analogous! The choir of angels praising God means that individual voices remain individual while collectively forming a symphony; an undivided harmony.

**GS:** Yet you once said that there was no such thing as "group meditation." What did you mean?

**GK:** I meant that we think alone; we cannot think as a group. Just as the members of a choir sing alone but, in singing alone, create harmony together. There is an Hassidic story about how much harder it is to sing alone than it is to sing with someone else. The same is true for meditation, and for any consciousness exercise. Nonetheless, we sing alone; we think alone; a group cannot think.

Of course, meditating exclusively in a group cannot work in the long run; we have to meditate alone as well. So we oscillate between solitary work and working together.



Thom Cooney Crawford: Temple Eye and 8 Uprights

**GS:** What would distinguish the speech and meetings of people in a true spiritual community?

**GK:** There would be no debates, for one thing. In most cases, the goal of debating is not to discover truth, but to be “right.” “I am right!” “You are right!” Deciding who is “right” is very different from searching for the truth. It is tinged with egotism. Thinking is a common denominator, if it is purified enough from everything that is not thinking — from egotism, for example, and from wishful or prejudiced thinking. The roots of thinking that can be reached by concentration, and still more by meditation, are common as well. So, wherever the everyday practice involves lifting consciousness into a common sphere, it is possible to build a true community.

**GS:** Does language itself divide us in some way?

**GK:** A problem arises anytime we use language without being aware that understanding one another ultimately depends on wordless, direct communication. We could call it the “good will” to understand each other. But this kind of good will isn’t the same as the will that we use to work at something; it consists of our reliance upon the mute, archetypal language that I call “direct communication.” We see direct communication at work when small children learn the meanings of their first few hundred words without any instructions from their parents or anyone else. The power to communicate wordlessly was lost at the Tower of Babel, but this archetypal language is still silently present whenever we understand each other.

**GS:** Can our everyday speech have a meditative dimension?

**GK:** Usually it is in the background. To express higher experiences or higher insights, we must use language very differently from the way we ordinarily use it. To convey information — writing instructions for a computer, for example — we use language in an exact, unambiguous way. New insights are much more difficult to communicate. To express new thoughts and ideas, we must use the ambiguity and wideness of meaning that the mother tongue always gives to words.

**GS:** And the emotions? If I speak out of anger

or out of envy...

**GK:** All expressions of emotion are, in the last analysis, uncommunicative as where they serve to hurt or to appease somebody. And the manipulation of others through speech—advertising is an example—is not communication.

**GS:** Are you describing different levels of communication?

**GK:** There are different levels of communication, of course.

And I would say that the highest level is love.

**GS:** How do you mean “love?”

**GK:** One kind of love tries to overcome separation —for example, the love between the genders, or between a mother and child, or between ourselves and what we cognize.

**GS:** Is this what you sometimes call the “first love?”

**GK:** Yes. The first love is always toward something that is given. The second love is for something that is not yet and, therefore, not yet given. It is a creative love for something that does not yet exist — a picture, a poem, the healing gesture of a physician. Healing someone is a creative deed, because it creates a possibility for someone to become whole. Creation is love.

**GS:** Is it possible to sustain a meditative dialog when we speak to each other—or do we continually swing back and forth between meditative attentiveness and egotism?

**GK:** We swing back and forth, and it is always a great achievement when we reach the level of not being separated.

**GS:** Your work with Thomas Aquinas has explored his term *adaequatio*. What does it mean?

**GK:** *Adaequatio* has to do with the mutual adaptation of the cognizer and the cognized; with becoming identical to what we cognize. Every time you read a demanding text, you discover something new. That’s because you adapt more and more deeply.

**GS:** You enter into the text?

**GK:** “Enter.” Yes, that’s a good word. You become the meaning more and more deeply. It’s an endless, endless process.

**We influence each other simply by being together.**

**GS:** Is that why you choose meditative themes from spiritual texts?

**GK:** We cannot meditate on purely informational texts. Meditative texts have a depth of meaning that informational texts don't have.

**GS:** The texts you work with in meditation exercises tend to come from the New Testament. Could they come from other spiritual traditions?

**GK:** Yes. Absolutely! We often use Zen texts.

**GS:** You have said that most of Rudolph Steiner's writing is meditative. Are study groups normally able to approach the meditative level of such texts?

**There is a receptive attentiveness that is the opposite of noise.**

**GK:** It depends on the participants. But it is very sad when people approach such texts as information. We can begin at the informational level, but it is a great mistake to take what one understands at that level as the true understanding of what Steiner is saying, because it doesn't touch the reality of the text. Discussing the informational content of a meditative text is like describing the shapes of the letters, instead of reading the words.

**GS:** Are such discussions harmful?

**GK:** Absolutely! They result in superstition, conjecture; stuff that contaminates our life, our consciousness. And the contamination is contagious! Somebody once called it "cosmic gossip."

**GS:** Is there a danger that people will negatively influence each other during group consciousness exercises?

**GK:** Such concerns usually arise when people are not clear about what meditation is. There is no such thing as "group consciousness," at least not for true consciousness. The kind of consciousness observed in fans at a soccer match, or a rock concert, consists of a very low level of awareness and meditation is just the opposite of this. People can always harm each other, of course, but meditation brings a higher level of awareness and self-awareness. It is a more defended state of consciousness that is safer from the intrusion of evil than is our everyday consciousness, where we are much less aware and awake.

**GS:** Did Steiner caution against group meditative work?

**GK:** Not that I know of. In fact, he used and recommended group meditation, even if he did not call it by that name. The so-called "First Class" texts that he gave in 1924 are almost entirely meditative and require a meditative listening to hear them properly. The true name for this is "guided meditation," which means that someone speaks, while the others follow this speech in a meditative way. This is group meditation.

**GS:** Did he actually address the subject of group meditative work?

**GK:** Yes. He spoke about a "new group soul" that can only develop through individual freedom. People who come together in freedom could, in his words, "make their feelings flow together." He was referring, of course, to cognitive feelings. When this happens, it becomes possible for higher beings to incarnate in the group. But this new kind of group soul makes many shudder because they are nervous about giving up their egotistic individuality.

**GS:** But isn't this nervousness partly justified? After all, various movements or cults have claimed group visions or missions to rationalize terrible acts.

**GK:** Surely, the experience that follows immediately after true meditation shows that it is impossible to feel such things as anger, hate or any kind of resentment toward another. Also, Steiner emphasized that the idea of a new group soul, unlike "old groups souls," could only develop through human freedom. His example is the appearance of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost. (*See e.g.*, G.A. 98, June 7, 1908.)

But your question also touches on the issue of certainty, and *signs* do not provide certainty. Sometimes, after meditating in a group, we can feel for a few minutes the presence of a being that we might identify as an angel, Christ, or the *logos*. But there is no such thing as a sign for truth. If we could recognize the truth by a sign, such as the wearing of a blue necktie, anyone who wanted to lie would put one on. Only purified thinking, feeling and willing can provide certainty. Finally, we possess doubt.

Doubt is a wonderful tool that is always appropriate.

**GS:** In *From Normal to Healthy* you wrote: “One should meet the speech of others with the greatest possible inner stillness; receptive silence. And this will influence the speaker too. He will be ashamed to say anything unmeaningful, or to use old forms of thought and speech.” But, aren’t we hopelessly addicted to our chatter; to the tangents and cleverness of our everyday speech, even when met by the “receptive silence” of another?

**GK:** We influence each other simply by being together, without saying or doing anything. What happens between us depends partly on how deep the listener’s receptive silence is and partly on how egotistic the speaker is. A very egotistic speaker may not be affected by the inner silence of the other although, as it happens more, he may be more affected. It’s not by chance that Steiner gave Right Speech and Right Listening as subsidiary exercises. Meditating is listening. In the moment when a new meaning lights up, there is a transition phase of empty or receptive attentiveness. And Right Listening, which is the basis for Right Speech, is easier in group meditative practice than in every day life, where informational communication tends to prompt debates.

**GS:** Is Right Listening simply inner silence?

**GK:** It is absolutely focusing on the speech of the other person! Of course, it requires inner silence; I don’t build my argument while the other person is speaking. But inner silence can be more than trying to think the thoughts of the speaker, without inwardly arguing or thinking one’s own thoughts. One can offer the speaker what I call a chalice. A chalice is not simply an empty space; it has a concave inner part. And even absolute silence lacks this concave inner part.

There is a silence beyond stillness that Steiner calls “negative silence.” —Not the absence of decibels, but a receptive attentiveness that is the opposite of noise.

**GS:** But we usually lack the attentiveness that you are describing, even though we might think we are fully focusing on the speech of another. Is receptive attentiveness something that only develops through concentration exercises and meditation?

**GK:** In concentrating, we discover this capacity.

**GS:** You say that we influence each other when we are together. What is it exactly that is influencing us?

**GK:** The attentiveness or, in other words, the love, influences us —as does the lack of it.

