

Perspective

# Safe Space for Dialogue—A Practice for Connected Consciousness and Compassion

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes Safe Space for Dialogue as a group practice for accessing connected consciousness through the safe expression of emotional experience, empathic listening, and compassionate witnessing. It highlights the importance of connected consciousness to overcome architectures of separation that breed fear, isolation, domination, and instrumentalization of relationships. Connected consciousness is an intersubjective, relational experience that makes possible connection, compassion, and empathic and generative dialogue. This article offers an outline of the main qualities of connected consciousness—safety, empathy and compassion, attunement, and resonance; it analyzes how the practice of Safe Space for Dialogue develops expanded awareness and compassion, supporting participants' access to the connected consciousness.

**Keywords:** connected consciousness; dialogue; compassion; empathy; safety; attunement; resonance; connection; listening; presencing; Theory U



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## 1. Introduction: Connected Consciousness as the Deep Source for Dialogue

How can we create authentic, open, and caring connections in the midst of social architectures based on separation and domination? These architectures build a dualistic worldview where the self is separate from the world and others, the subject from the object, and the inner world from the outer world, obscuring their dynamic interconnectedness in the larger web of life. The social structures prevalent in capitalism are based on competition, insecurity, and the instrumentalization of relationships with a negative impact on connectedness [1]. The outcomes of architectures of separation are denial, othering, alienation, and the instrumentalization of others [2]. Technology makes possible the information, cognitive-based global awareness through the World Wide Web; never before in human history have we witnessed events around the globe in real time and connected so easily with people around the world. However, this cognitive global awareness is not sufficiently accompanied by heart-centered connected consciousness—by a deep sense of belonging to the world and interconnectedness with all life. This internal dimension, which includes individual and collective worldviews, assumptions, and values, is in need of scrutiny and transformation ([3], p. 125).

The social architecture of separation creates a struggle for power that alienates people from their shared humanity and a sense of interconnectedness with nature. This alienation underpins a worldview based on egocentric, short-term, utilitarian, and extractive behaviors that harm the planet and destabilize communities ([3], p. 129); it is a worldview that supports the Anthropocene, an era where humans dominate and exploit nature in unsustainable ways to enhance ever-growing economies [3]. The individualistic, competitive, and power-based ethos of capitalism creates a structure of the self as a closed system preoccupied with survival and success through the accumulation of various forms of capital (financial, social, and relational), which leads to a loss of resonance and connectedness [4]. The firm grip of this worldview of closed-heartedness turns connections

with others and nature into a means to enhance one's own social status and position, undermining reciprocity, care, and compassion [4]; it creates an ever-increasing harmful dynamic of acceleration, fragmentation, stress, and isolation. Neoliberal globalization has been critiqued for contributing to the rise of global inequality, environmental degradation, increasing conflict, and an egoic, self-interested worldview that threatens sustainability on the planet [5].

Overcoming this worldview requires an intentional commitment to experience deep connections with others and the world through practices that cultivate connected consciousness and awareness of the unity of life. Connected consciousness contributes to the development of empathy and a global mindset, seen as moral imperatives of our time ([5], p. 169). The two most well-known ways to cultivate connected consciousness are mindfulness practices and genuine dialogue that deepen the capacity to listen and respond from a space of connected consciousness. This paper analyzes the practice of Safe Space for Dialogue (SSD), a process that combines compassion meditation with empathic dialogue to create instant open-hearted connectedness in groups. SSD facilitates access to connected consciousness through the sharing of an emotionally intense experience, active listening, and compassionate mirroring. We explore the role of SSD in overcoming an egocentric worldview of separation and dualism by reducing trauma reactions and enhancing compassion, attunement, and resonance. We also suggest the potential contribution of SSD to presencing and Theory U.

Connected consciousness nurtures collaboration, trust, and co-creative capacities, which are three of the social skills in the IDG (Inner Development Goals) framework, developed in 2023 to accompany the Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on the development of inner human capacities [6]. Connected consciousness also enriches the quality of communication, creating access to “the language of the heart”, a crucial trait for empathic and generative dialogue [7]. Empathic dialogue is a form of conversation that decenters the ego-based mindset and makes it possible to understand and feel the inner world of others; it is a “way to look at a situation through the eyes of somebody else” ([8], p. 25). Empathic dialogue creates a sense of connection with others and develops self-awareness. The quality and depth of empathy and connectedness contribute to another level of dialogue known as “generative”—a way to access meaning larger than the sum of individual opinions. Generative dialogue contributes to collective creativity and gives access to an intersubjective field that includes not only self and others but also a third dimension of wisdom emerging from the flow of interactions [9]. Generative dialogue is a way to think together, suspending one's individual assumptions and accessing the social field from which new ideas can emerge ([9], p. 8). The purpose of dialogue is to enter a state of coherence and access the “pool of common meaning” by suspending one's individual view of truth [10]. The more we practice dialogue, the more we develop a special sensitivity that gathers meaning out of the participative, collective nature of thought [10].

It is difficult, if not impossible, to engage in generative dialogue when we see our opinions as the ultimate truth or when we are disconnected from others by trauma or an egocentric worldview of separation and competition. The practice of SSD is a practice of empathic dialogue that creates inner and interpersonal capacities necessary for generative dialogue; it creates authentic, trusting relationships that connect one's inner world with the inner world of others beyond exchanges of thoughts and opinions; it opens up the heart to connected consciousness as a way to restore one's integrity (wholeness), moving out of an egocentric worldview to experience a sense of belonging; and it challenges the separation-based, dualistic mindset of individualism, enhancing participants' awareness that consciousness is shared and collective. The explicit purpose of SSD is to heal and connect by opening the protective barriers of the self to an intersubjective field. We currently see a great interest in transforming a dualistic, ego-centric perspective into an interconnected worldview—an evolutionary shift towards an integral consciousness that remains nevertheless elusive and ambiguous ([11], p. 1049). We start with a definition

of connected consciousness as a more integral, dialogic, and resonant way of being in the world.

## 2. What Is Connected Consciousness?

While connected consciousness is a worldview familiar to Indigenous traditions, there is not much clarity about what it means and how we can access it in individualist cultures. It is a subjective experience of unity between ourselves and others—a relational way of being in the world based on belonging, open-heartedness, and reciprocity. It is a worldview based on access to our shared humanity—our intersubjective nature. Connected consciousness has also been defined as “systems being”; a way to experience the world as an interconnected and interdependent system to which we belong [12]. The two fundamental relational emotions in systems being are love and fear. Connected consciousness is a continuum that moves towards love at one end and fear at the opposite end. Love expands the boundaries of the individual self towards others, while fear constricts the self and leads to building protective mechanisms against connectedness [12]. These are the two basic dynamics of the embodied self as a system living in the world—constriction (individualization) or expansion (unity and connected consciousness). Consciousness is more than the sum of individual perceptions, emotions, and thought. It refers to a way of being in the world—an intuitive and experiential awareness that includes and also transcends the individual ([13], p. 60) We use here the term connected consciousness to highlight the interconnectedness—the unity—between the individual and the world, self and other. Our social world is separated by national identities and racial, cultural, gender, and religious differences, where connectedness can be experienced only with one’s affiliated groups. Connectedness with people outside one’s identity group is possible when we can access a deeper level of awareness. How can we expand connected consciousness to a circle wide enough or porous enough to avoid the downsides of egocentrism? How can this capacity be restored when it has been broken by the architectures of separation and trauma adaptations?

Connected consciousness is a defining feature of many Indigenous cultures that value relationality, harmony, and balance in all things [3]. It is also a worldview supported by many other spiritual traditions that point to a deeper unity principle—a nondual common ground that underlies the world of appearance ([11], p. 1051; [14]). Wilber uses an evolutionary developmental framework to define integral or holistic consciousness as a stage that embraces diverse traditions and forms of knowledge into a unitive, coherent perspective [15]. It transcends the dualism between mind/body and self/other, increasing one’s capacity to engage with complexity and access connected consciousness not based on a specific identity affiliation. Integral consciousness is a stage of human development defined as inclusive and all-embracing of different forms of knowledge and diverse spiritualities without seeing only one of them as the ultimate truth; it can hold a vision of the whole and it is better equipped for complexity [15].

It is a level of consciousness that is non-dualistic, based on systems thinking and transpersonal vision [15]. The evolution of consciousness is seen as a gradual consciousness shift away from an egocentric perspective based on self-protection ([14], p. 53). This shift to an integral consciousness has the potential to undo “the crisis of consciousness” that contributed to the creation of the ecological crisis and other urgent global issues ([14], p. 57). Gangadean uses the concept of the “awakened global mind” to name a shift in consciousness that defies the separation between the inner and the outer world, perceiving the fundamental unity that underlies the self, others, and the planet ([11], p. 1051).

Daniel Siegel refers to connected consciousness as intersubjective experience, arguing that the mind is not bound and restricted to our individual bodies but it is a dynamic process of interaction between the self and the world [16]. The self is connected to other human beings and nature; it is constantly engaged in systems much bigger than the individual. Seeing it as separate and bound to one’s body or defining consciousness as the activity of an individual’s brain is the result of a modern scientific worldview based on separation [16].

The mind is much more than brain activity—it is an embodied and relational process where an individual's interactions constantly re-shape neural connections in a feedback loop process studied by the emerging science of interpersonal neurobiology [17].

Connected consciousness can be experienced as a shared sphere at different levels of experience—physical (energy), emotional (emotions), cognitive (ideas), and spiritual (meaning, faith, and unity). The main qualities of connected consciousness are safety, empathy and compassion, attunement and resonance.

Safety is a relational concept that defines two or more nervous systems engaging one another with openness, coherence, and connection in the absence of any real or perceived threat [18].

Empathy is the ability to enter fully into someone else's perspective from both a cognitive and an emotional perspective [19].

Compassion is the capacity to sense the suffering of others accompanied by a sincere wish to alleviate it [20].

Attunement is a state of attention, curiosity, and energetic co-regulation with others [21].

Resonance is an experience of mutual engagement that implies being emotionally moved by others, responding in a way that cannot be controlled, and leading to transformation [4].

The more we nurture and cultivate these capacities and ways of relating to others, the more we can live our lives from the space of connected consciousness. The shift towards this type of consciousness is facilitated by mindfulness and compassion practices [13]. Connected consciousness is the emotional/spiritual source for deep relationships that have intrinsic value and are based on mutual recognition, respect, and resonance. It is the source of collective intelligence and co-creativity. If the shift to connected consciousness is so essential to engage with the current global crises, and if we have a long tradition of spiritual practices that support that shift, what are the forces that prevent it?

### 3. The Fragility of Connected Consciousness: The Disconnection of Trauma

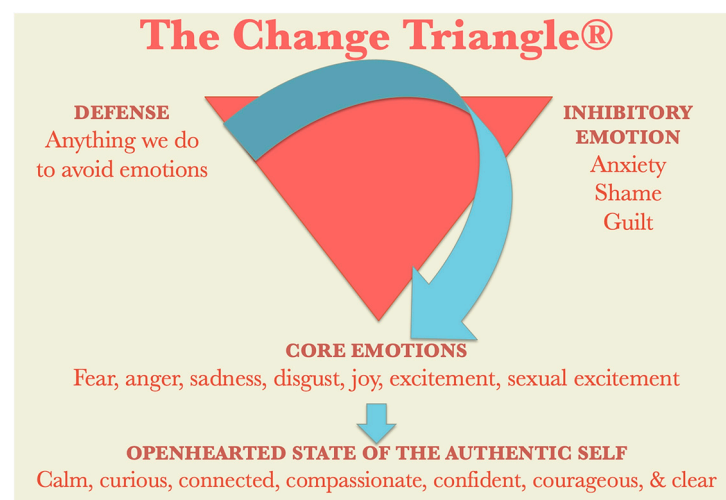
As you can see in these qualities, connected consciousness expands awareness and supports a worldview of compassion, but it is also a fragile experience that can be easily shattered by trauma, toxic relationships, and life stress [22]. For example, experiences of exclusion can lead to intense suffering that will reinforce a closed-hearted, protective self. Empathy, which is normally seen as a positive capacity, can lead to disconnection when it becomes too stressful to feel the negative emotions of others [23]. Attachment traumas create a deep mistrust in relationships and strong boundaries of individual separation from others [16].

Disconnection or separation happens when people feel alone in moments of vulnerability or when they do not experience safety, belonging, and dignity in relationships [24]. Alone, in this case, means not only the physical experience of isolation but also the experience of not being understood, not belonging, or not being valued in social contexts. Disconnection from one's core self and from others is the result of trauma, which can be constantly reinforced by experiences of violence, injustice, and oppression [25]. The effort to protect oneself from what is hurtful leads to trauma adaptation as a form of dissociation from one's body and disconnection from others. In these situations, people's instinctive reactions are to close down, withdraw, or attack based on the fight, flight, freeze, or appease embodied mechanism of protection. Toxic or abusive relationships lead to distress and negative emotions that alienate individuals from the experience of connected consciousness. Experiences of violence create intense negative emotions that are difficult to manage for the individual, but they are also difficult to manage in relationships and social contexts.

Despite the best intentions to help in difficult situations, most people react with a desire to change the person experiencing negative emotions instead of empathic witnessing and recognition. Reacting without fully understanding the emotional experience of others leads to a constriction of the perceptual field and to disconnection; it adds insult to injury. This way of relating is a cultural norm—an unconscious priority to control, repress, and deny painful emotions in oneself and others. This cultural norm diminishes

the importance of processing time for difficult experiences, awareness of harmful systems, and the crucial value of the compassionate presence of others. The absence of empathic listening is a common and current feature in everyday conversations that takes its toll by disconnecting people from their inner world and the inner world of others, disrupting access to connected consciousness.

A privileged moment for deep transformation is activated when a traumatic event concurs with the experience of connection. When a crisis is faced with connection, openness, and compassion, something extraordinary happens—pain turns into an experience of resilience and adaptive response. The experience of painful emotions in the absence of connection and compassionate witnessing is accompanied by resistance and building defense mechanisms of protection. Diana Fosha explains this mechanism through the inverted change triangle that represents core emotions at the base and three inhibitory forces that prevent access to core emotions [26]. The left angle refers to behaviors that human beings use to escape—to distract themselves in moments of unpleasant feelings, such as turning on the TV, immersing themselves in social media, changing the subject in a conversation, addictive behaviors, etc. The upper right corner represents the three inhibitory emotions—guilt, anxiety, and shame—that hijack attention and prevent the person from moving to the recognition and exploration of basic or central emotions, e.g., sadness, fear, anger, joy, excitement, disgust, etc. Being able to engage these emotions with acceptance and presence eventually leads to healthy emotional integration. Basic emotions give us information about our interaction with the outside environment that is essential to the survival, well-being, and homeostatic balance of the embodied self [27]. A perceived threat to one's integrity, embodied safety, or basic needs creates intense basic negative emotions that are repressed and replaced by inhibitory emotions. Inhibitory emotions block core emotions when these become too overwhelming or when they are not socially accepted. They create dynamics of disconnection, inner fragmentation, and protection. Repressing core emotions and covering them up with anxiety, shame, or guilt leads to protective and defensive behaviors that block connection (Figure 1) [26].



**Figure 1.** The Change Triangle: Hillary Jacobs Hendell, <https://www.hilaryjacobshendel.com/what-is-the-change-triangle-c18dd> (accessed on 25 May 2024).

When painful emotions are ignored or hidden, they lead to trauma adaptations, which undermine connected consciousness. Unprocessed pain becomes suffering—an uncomfortable visitor that abruptly appears in consciousness and ruins the day in the face of unexpected and seemingly harmless stimuli. Paradoxically, the initial resistance to acknowledging a painful feeling or a loss can become a transformative experience of resilience when it is honored, explored, acknowledged, and when it is compassionately witnessed by another. Peter Levine captured this poetically, as follows: “It is how we respond to a traumatic event that determines whether trauma will be a cruel and punishing

Medusa turning us into stone, or whether it will be a spiritual teacher taking us along vast and uncharted pathways” ([28], p. 135). Trauma can be a gateway to learning and expansion of the self into connected consciousness when it is adequately processed in safe relationships [29].

The Change Triangle is a concise way to understand and engage with the long-term effects of painful experiences; it shows how momentary experiences of negative emotions can bear long-term effects of disconnection through fear, shame, and guilt. Recognizing and retrieving access to core emotions in the presence of compassionate relationships leads to connected consciousness.

The key factor that prevents a painful experience from turning into a long-term trauma effect of losing access to connected consciousness is the presence of compassionate, connected relationships. Open-hearted, compassionate relationships can both prevent trauma from happening and contribute to the healing of trauma and the restoring of access to connected consciousness.

#### 4. Safe Space for Dialogue Creates Instant Open-Hearted Connection

The practice of Safe Space for Dialogue (SSD) creates instant, open-hearted connection, even with people we meet for the first time. Open-heartedness is a way to transcend our individual boundaries—a way to look at a situation through the eyes of somebody else with empathy; it is a state of assumed vulnerability, authenticity, and compassion for other people’s experiences. It can be a path to connectedness, calm, and joy in safe contexts but it can also be a source of pain and fear in contexts that are unsafe. If we see the heart as the metaphorical seat of emotions and relational engagement with the world, creating more opportunities to express and listen deeply to emotional experiences increases self-awareness and connected consciousness. We use the word “relationships” to refer to our interactions with others, but not many of them are subjective experiences of connectedness, empathy, and resonance. In fact, more and more people experience loneliness and isolation despite the increase in their social networks and despite the great amount of research showing the benefits of connectedness [30].

Safe, genuine dialogue that involves an opening of the heart is a valued practice in the field of conflict mediation as a process that can heal past wounds [31]. This is a humanistic approach that involves more than the techniques of suspension of judgment, active listening, and validation; it is about the quality of empathy, heart-based presence, and positive regard ([31], p. 204). As we will show in our exploration of SSD, the focus of this practice is the growth of empathy and compassion. We would argue that it is this quality of presence and relationality that facilitates access to connected consciousness.

SSD is a relatively simple process inspired by Carl Rogers, Marshall Rosenberg, and Kurt Lewin. It contains the well-known dialogical techniques of active listening, empathic feedback, and emotional expression common in many practices of interpersonal communication. What, then, is the innovation of SSD? There are three key elements that give birth to a familiar and yet different instrument with a powerful effect on the development of empathy, compassion, and access to the connected consciousness: (1) centering through loving-kindness meditation, (2) sharing the experience of a moment of strong feeling, and (3) having other people mirror, with empathy, one’s shared experience.

SSD is based on the concepts of Experiential Listening and the focusing on Moments of Strong Feelings (MSF) discussed by Alvin Mahrer [32]. SSD uses a simple and straightforward way to start a deep dialogue in a group—sharing an experience of strong feeling in detail, like a scene in a movie or a picture. A chosen listener mirrors back what they heard, including the shared emotion. Other participants can add aspects they witnessed in the shared experience. This process allows the sharing person to access and express the emotional content of their experience and see it through the eyes of others. Each person becomes accompanied by others in their emotional experiences, which is a process that enhances access to connected consciousness. This way of structuring creates instant emotional connection through the practice of sharing emotions felt in specific contexts,

active listening, and compassionate mirroring. Participants can share positive or negative emotions according to their own level of safety and trust. A picture shared in an experiential dialogue is usually like a hidden door located on the border between conscious and unconscious, self, and other. When the reality visible and accessible to the person is listened to and validated, a gateway to a deeper dimension is opened, which reveals the hidden dimension of an iceberg—the inner place from which the person operates [8].

In order to ensure connection and create a sense of safety, SSD requires the participants to share an experience, not an idea; to stay within a phenomenological description where the following two dimensions are to be addressed: (a) the feelings and sensations inside your skin and (b) the contextual elements outside your skin. It also requires listeners to refrain from making observations, judgments, or adding their personal commentary. This encourages a compassionate way to engage with another's experience simply by reflecting its emotional content. During SSD, in the process of experiential listening, something special happens; the participants in a dialogue—both those who speak and those who listen—begin to gradually place themselves in a position of connected consciousness that allows them to interact with greater transparency and depth. The practice helps participants advance, imperceptibly, in the development of their level of awareness and access to collective intelligence.

The SSD process restores access to one's core emotional experience and creates more safety and trust in others. Being compassionately witnessed and held in the heart of others in a moment of painful emotional experience contributes to healing as an experience of connected consciousness. It has been identified as the most effective way to heal trauma and a protective factor that can transform a crisis experience into an opportunity for growth [33]. Being listened to with compassion reduces loneliness, deepens intimacy, and comforts the pain of difficult experiences [33]. Creating a safe space for self-expression and compassionate listening heals the disconnection created by rejection, abandonment, or exclusion [32], two aspects that the SSD practice offers to participants.

The phrase "safe space for dialogue" may have negative connotations of participants becoming isolated from the broader public, the intrusion of unwanted information, or negative consequences created by breaches in confidentiality [34]. SSD creates safety through the following set of principles:

1. Confidentiality agreement;
2. The choice to share or not to share;
3. The choice to share an emotionally difficult or pleasant experience;
4. Withholding judgment, fixing, advice, or even words of sympathy.

The purpose is to create attunement and compassion by listening attentively and accompanying the person who shares in their emotional experience. Participants discover that they can feel with others and, besides offering a mirror to what they heard, they can share their own emotional reactions.

#### *The Process of SSD*

Similarly to NVC practices, Trust Circles, Empathy Circles, Interpersonal Learning Circles, etc., SSD partners are invited to honor a time to speak and a time to listen. Each time is to be respected and limited to a maximum of 3–5 min. This can be done in small groups of 5–6 people or in larger groups.

1. One person is invited to share, in great detail, an emotional experience for 2–3 min. Where were you? With whom? What was the situation? What emotions did you experience? The invitation is to avoid turning it into a general story and staying as close to the experience as possible, like describing a scene from a movie. The sharing person chooses a main listener.
2. When the time of listening arrives, the invited listener is to do an experiential account of what they heard in the present tense. In doing this, they need to give up any attempt to change or influence the sharing person. They can use the verbs "imagine",

- “sense”, or “feel”, mirroring back what they heard and staying very close to the shared content. They can check if the sharing person feels understood.
3. If the group is small and there is enough time, other participants may add details about what they felt or witnessed during the sharing.
  4. The listener becomes the next sharing person, and the process continues until everyone has had a chance to share.

In 2021, a core group of four participants from different parts of the world (Canada, Mexico, and Germany) started a practice of the Safe Space for Dialogue in a process called The Compassion Circle, offering it as a hub on the website of the Presencing Institute. The monthly practice continues today with the same quality of engagement, with new people joining frequently, some of whom are integrating this practice into their own facilitation, coaching, or teaching. There is a relatively steady number of about 8–10 participants every month. The process contributes to the participants’ emotional self-awareness and compassion, creating a safe space of connected consciousness despite geographical distance and cultural differences. Many first-time participants were surprised by the easy and quick experience of connectedness with strangers. The core group came to this practice through their interest in Theory U and the process of presencing [4]. The three authors are part of this core group. Two of us (S.M. and R.C.) have been involved in the implementation of SSD in educational settings for more than 30 years, while the first author (B.B.) has worked extensively with transformative pedagogies that enhance the intelligence of the heart and contribute to spiritual development—love, empathy, compassion, and presencing. We all share a deep commitment to creating spaces and processes that reconnect people to their authentic selves, others, and the world. As we engaged in Theory U learning, we became interested in the potential of SSD to develop the empathy and connectedness needed for collective creativity and presencing.

### 5. Presencing, Theory U, and Safe Space for Dialogue (SSD)

The practice of SSD in the Compassion Circle is an ongoing process that deepens self-awareness and connected consciousness, contributing to people’s capacity to engage in group processes with an open heart. The practice entails a process of collective traveling to the core of one’s authentic experience through compassionate listening—a re-connection of the self to others through safety and compassion. It has the potential to contribute to the transformative effectiveness of Theory U and other group processes by creating instant experiences of connected consciousness, even among participants with different worldviews. It is difficult, if not impossible, for participants in a group to engage in generative dialogue without self-awareness and connected consciousness.

Theory U is a participative methodology that relies on the metaphor of a journey to the depths of the inner world in order to access new meanings and engage in transformation. This journey is made collectively, with the most important step of presencing—a combination of the words ‘presence’ and ‘sensing’ [35]. The purpose of the process is to collectively sense the future that wants to emerge [35]. The capacity for presence depends on participants’ level of self-awareness, connectedness, and systems awareness. Many collective projects aim for group collaboration without paying attention to the cultivation of connected consciousness as a source for intersubjective perception and collective creativity. Trauma adaptations and architectures of separation prevent the experience of connected consciousness.

Scharmer argues that presencing implies a process of reconnecting the individual self with the collective or higher Self through increased awareness and mindful presence [8]. The individual ‘self’ (using lowercase s) represents who we are due to our history (i.e., our childhood, education, social, and cultural community). The second ‘Self’ (using capital S) concerns our highest future possibility, and it is an experience of the intersubjective field [8]. The intersubjective social field is the space of collective intelligence and creativity that can be accessed through dialogue based on connected consciousness, attunement, and resonance. In order to engage in the act of presencing, learners need radical openness;



“Receptivity to the emerging future requires an open mind, open heart and open will, as the individual’s perception opens to the social field” ([8], p. 31). The opening of perception to the social field is predicated on the integration of the three dimensions of knowing, being, and will-based action into connected consciousness that transcends an individual worldview. The capacity for connectedness increases with the opening of the individual self to its collective dimension. Building a safe container in the Theory U process through the quality of intention, attention, and empathic listening is crucial for supporting participants to let go of the resistance created by fear and lack of trust [8]. Theory U does not offer strategies for working through resistance or creating intersubjective capacity for those who find it impossible to experience connected consciousness due to past traumatic experiences. Similarly, it does not account for the difficulties of intersubjectivity that run counter to the modern Western individualistic ethos. The practice of SSD contributes to the restoration of connected consciousness through the practice of listening and speaking from the heart. This contributes to self-awareness as the integration of one’s own emotional experience and giving access to connected consciousness through empathic, compassionate listening; it creates and sustains deep engagement in collaboration by nurturing safety, attunement, resonance, and compassion.

## 6. SSD Develops the Capacity to Listen and Speak with Compassion

How can we listen and engage in dialogue with an open mind, open heart, and open will? The inability to listen represents the most serious limitation of a leader, and most of the listening in our modern context happens only partially at the level of the mind ([8], p. 26). To listen with an open heart, it is necessary to get out of one’s bounded self and one’s individual perspective, to peek from the periphery of one’s own worldview and witness the inner world of others. There are four levels of listening, which underpin four types of dialogue, as follows:

Downloading: listening to reconfirm one’s perspective;

Factual: listening to notice new information;

Empathic: entering, emotionally, the experience of another person and listening with an open heart;

Generative: a deeper, intuitive listening for emerging wisdom and creativity that is accessible in special conditions of access to the intersubjective social field ([8], p. 27).

Most interpersonal and group interactions rely on the first two types of listening, which creates discussions rather than dialogue. Dialogue implies a deeper listening that engages emotions and that is reciprocal, open, and empathic; it is a form of communication common in intimate relationships or healing relationships but less cultivated in public conversations. To listen with an open heart is the ability to empathically engage with different perspectives and move away from the centrality of the self in conversations. Empathy has been defined as “the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions” ([19], p. 215). Listening with an open heart opens access to our connected consciousness—an intersubjective, relational space where there is no distance between the speaker and the listener. The experience of others listening with empathy, through mirroring and validation in the SSD practice, creates safety and facilitates more access to one’s emotions and experience, enhancing one’s courage to speak from the heart [7]. It contributes to more self-awareness of one’s inner world and emotional responses that are collectively witnessed in a safe context. Empathic listening facilitates a deeper, more intimate way of speaking. When the shared emotional experiences are painful, being witnessed with empathy and compassion contributes to healing. A study of the weekly practice of SSD showed improvement in the quality of relationships as measured by an increase in the perception of emotional support among couples [36].

Compassion means the capacity to bear witness to suffering and the desire to alleviate suffering [37]. The practice of both speaking and listening from the heart in SSD shifts communication into an experience of connected consciousness, increasing empathy and

compassion. It repairs the traumatic imprint of architectures of separation (fear, isolation, alienation, mistrust, etc.) through compassionate witnessing.

Losing access to connected consciousness leads to a spiritual void and feeling disconnected from others. Koss and Holder define spirituality as “a feeling of connectedness to something greater experienced by cultivating a relationship with oneself, one’s community, one’s environment, and one’s perception of the transcendent” ([38], p. 207). In this definition, connectedness can lead to the transcendence of the individual self through increased awareness of one’s wholeness and the experience of connected consciousness with others and the environment. The experience of connected consciousness implies more attunement to others—more openness to their perspectives but also more awareness of the suffering they carry. This awareness increases compassion and a sense of ethical responsibility towards the world.

The cultivation of compassion is an essential aspect of Buddhist spirituality. The most well-known practice is the metta, or loving-kindness meditation, as a form of meditation that focuses on extending loving thoughts towards the self and people from one’s inner and outer circle. We start the practice of SSD with metta meditation followed by a dialogue process of sharing an emotional experience and listening with compassion, without any attempt to fix. If we see compassion as a state of concern for the suffering of others and the desire to alleviate that suffering, one way to alleviate suffering is to restore access to the connected consciousness by listening with an open heart and witnessing each other’s full humanity.

Daniel Siegel’s phrase captures most effectively the two crucial factors in responding with compassion to others, as follows: “I feel your pain, and I’m able to hold that pain inside of me enough to think about how I’m going to skillfully take an action to reduce your suffering” ([39], p. 127). The first factor is empathic listening coupled with compassionate witnessing, while the second factor implies some form of action to help or support. Most of our conversations move quickly to the second factor—helping, giving advice, finding solutions, without first feeling with the other, holding their experience, and attuning and connecting to their experience and pain.

The capacity to feel and hold inside the emotions of others depends on receptive states, which are the opposite of reactive states caused by stress [39]. Being in a receptive state means being in an open, flexible, attuned engagement with the world that has become less and less possible in environments dominated by high stress and reactive ways of being. While mindfulness is seen as a form of “internal attunement”, compassion involves attunement to the internal states of others [39]. Engaging in a compassionate, present, and resonant way with other people contributes to a sense of belonging and connected consciousness that enhances well-being. It makes us feel seen and recognized in our humanity and in our capacity to feel and engage with the world. Personal integration happens through interconnected relationships ([39], p. 122). Attuned, caring, resonant, and trusting relationships increase self-awareness, well-being, and the integration of mind, body, and emotions within an individual. Compassion means a commitment to care for others not out of a learned moral duty but because we feel with them; it is a capacity to stay open and receptive despite our instinctive desires to protect ourselves from the discomfort and uneasiness of feeling with others. Stress, negative emotions, and experiences of trauma shift our human responses into shutdown reactivity, but the protection itself undermines the experience of connected consciousness and reduces well-being in the long term. Compassion helps restore resonance when it has been lost by softening the protective edges of the self and building deep connections between the self and others; it shifts the perception of one’s suffering from a problem to be solved to a message to be deciphered and an emotion to be witnessed.

The feelings of the small and large wounds that arise from daily life ask to be listened to, and that experience of being compassionately witnessed acts as a springboard for growth, integration, and well-being. Listening with compassion is based on the basic premise of giving up the urge to change the other and concentrate on imagining and

emotionally stepping into the film of their experience [40]. A person's perceptual field expands when they are witnessed in the full truth of their experience. This condition of broadening the vision builds a sense of connected consciousness and increases the capacity to engage in dialogue in a more receptive rather than reactive state. It also contributes to a state of well-being by fostering safety, belonging, and dignity.

SSD cultivates compassion by establishing a space for attuning to the inner experiences of others, paying attention without judgment or the desire to change them. Listening with attention and emotional resonance to a short moment of their lives slowly develops the capacity to tolerate negative emotions and understand the contexts in which they arise. The mirroring response is a symbolic accompaniment to the difficult experience. When mirroring is done with compassion, it brings relief and healing by opening access to connected consciousness. It shows the person sharing the story that they are not alone and their core emotions are valid. The experience of being listened to with compassion leads us to touch a deep space of connected consciousness—to become more attuned and present to others.

### 7. SSD as a Practice of Attunement

Attunement has been defined by Thomas Hübl as caring attention to the many unseen layers of information stored in our embodied system ([21], p. 46). Attunement enhances our ability to sense the wholeness of others—to see and feel them more clearly. He relies on the metaphor of musical synchronization to highlight attunement as an intentional capacity to shift one's own "speed" in order to tune in to the experience of others—to slow down and align one's perception and "frequency" with theirs. This creates a relationship of exchange, co-regulation, and responsibility each of us carries for the quality of our presence to the well-being of others. It creates an experience of "feeling felt" that contributes to safety, belonging, and well-being [21].

This relational approach is in stark opposition to the cultural norm of urging people to change and move quickly through difficult emotional experiences. While co-regulation is a relational function of our nervous system that happens automatically, intentional attunement means to make oneself available to compassionate witnessing of others in full awareness of one's own inner world. Intentional attunement is a way to navigate the intersubjective space with awareness and attention to all the subtle layers of communication (embodied, emotional, disconnection that comes from trauma triggers, etc.).

The practice of SSD invites attunement. The moment of experience is shared as a vivid short story. This short structure allows listeners to maintain focused attention and notice subtle cues in the emotional body language of the person who shares. The focus on emotional experience can also maintain attunement because the story does not move into analysis or abstract ideas that will shift the attention from the embodied presence and emotions of the sharing person. Without this structure, the sharing of the story can become long or tedious, which damages attunement. Each listener is invited to be a mirror to the story, thus holding in awareness not only its informational content but also the body language and its emotional and energetic content that may have been unconscious for the sharing person.

The exploration of one's story can occur through two axes—the vertical and the horizontal. Just as in the plots of movies or novels, phenomenological description takes place through linear, horizontal, and chronological time within the vertical perspective—the listener's radar is set not on the sequential plot or on the literal content but on the emergence of moments of strong feeling that are focused, sustained, and appreciated as the master key to open a gateway to deeper layers. The horizontal linear time of Chronos gives way to Kairós—the vertical time of evolution and connected consciousness where transformation emerges and the subjective time clock stops [41]. The basic experiential watchword of the vertical path is to imagine, as deeply as possible, the experience of the other—their experiential photo and their moment of strong feeling—and to pause the urge to solve their problem.

This focus on the vertical dimension of listening in the SSD practice increases attuned coherence in the group, where the story of one person can bring into awareness similar experiences. While the main listener is invited to access intentional attunement, other listeners can also mirror aspects that may have remained unseen, thus creating a collective attunement that enhances safety and co-regulation, thereby contributing to the experience of “feeling felt”. The practice increases the capacity for attunement not only with others but also with oneself, slowing down to notice our own bodies and emotions. Participants have shared how at times they felt certain sensations of constriction, tension, or exhilaration in their own bodies based on the attunement to the body language of the person sharing the story. This attentive presence to someone else’s experience builds a sense of connection that restores safety and trust in relationships while expanding awareness of our interconnected selves. If Hübl sees “. . .the art of attunement as a balance between interior and exterior, self and other, being and belonging”, the practice of SSD offers a way to practice this art and balance subjective experience with intersubjective experience, which also contributes to restoring the quality of resonance in relationships ([21], p. 261); it reduces the protective mechanisms of an egocentric mindset, creating access to connected consciousness. This in turn enhances participants’ openness and receptivity to empathic and generative dialogue.

### 8. SSD Cultivates Resonance

While attunement is a capacity for complex and focused attention to the subtle layers of information, emotions, and energy in specific interactions, resonance brings attention to the complex dynamic of transformation that happens in relationships. Hartmut Rosa sees resonance as the defining feature of a good life in opposition to reifying, instrumental relationships that follow a logic of accumulation [4]. He defines resonance as a mutually affecting, emotion-based relationship in which each party is touched, moved by, and transformed by the other in unpredictable ways and without an instrumental goal [4]. The individualistic ethos creates a structure of the self as a closed system using relationships for its survival and advancement, seeing them as a means to an end. Relationships that stem from this worldview are not valued in and of themselves but as instruments for the purpose of optimizing the self. Resonance implies a state of emotional vulnerability, trust, and openness of the self and the acceptance of a dimension of mystery—of not knowing how a relationship will transform us. The relationships that escape the logic of instrumentalization are love, friendship, and solidarity [42]. When we engage in objectifying relationships, we do not experience the aliveness and energy of “feeling felt” for who we truly are. Our interface with the world becomes a source of vulnerability and fear rather than one of belonging and nurturing form of “interbeing” [43]; our humanity is diminished and only certain aspects of it are valued, with some of them even being forcibly erased.

Resonance has the following four essential traits: (1) affect as in being touched or moved by the other; (2) e-motion as in responding in emotionally meaningful and constructive ways to the other; (3) this mutual dynamic leading to an intersubjective space where transformation happens; and (4) this dynamic being uncontrolled, with its outcomes having a mysterious quality that cannot be known a priori [4]. Rosa relies on the metaphors of “tuning forks” or “vibrating wires” to describe a fluid, vibrating, and mutually transformative relationship that pendulates between receptivity and action ([4], p. 167). One of the difficult aspects of resonance is the polarization between receptivity and action; too much receptivity leads to a passive, submissive relationship, while too much action and intervention on others leads to control, domination, and aggression. Depending on personality, identity, and social positioning, many people enter relationships divided along these poles, which destroys resonance.

SSD invites participants to practice balancing their listening, as receptivity to the world of the other with timed expression and compassionate response. The attentive listening to an experiential story and its accompanying emotions affects and touches those who listen. The person sharing the story experiences a sense of safety and dignity when being seen and listened to, while the listener who mirrors has a chance to respond in

an empathic way to another person without a prior intention. The structured dialogue balances receptivity with expression, creating a space of connected consciousness where a non-instrumental transformation is possible. A study of 31 couples using SSD showed a significant correlation between consistency of practice and an increase in relationship satisfaction [44]. Participants may be touched or triggered by the story; they may feel joy and compassion or sadness and worry, but what remains constant is their experience of resonance—being touched by the compassionate witnessing of others and touching others in their subjective experience without an instrumental purpose.

## 9. Conclusions

The practice of Safe Space for Dialogue restores the experience of connected consciousness, enhancing capacities for compassion, attunement, and resonance. These capacities contribute to open-hearted dialogue and access to connected consciousness—a capacity needed to overcome the separation-based, ego-centric worldview of capitalism that sees both people and nature as means to an end. Connected consciousness is a level of awareness based on a deep, emotional sense of belonging to others; an intersubjective experience of unity and interconnectedness. This worldview counteracts the damaging effects of the egocentric, utilitarian, extractive mindset that contributes to the climate crisis and the loss of a sense of belonging to a community [3–5]. It contributes to reconnecting with one's experiential, embodied self, recognizing that consciousness is shared. SSD practice may restore access to connected consciousness when it has been damaged by trauma effects and separation-based structures through a deep dialogue based on emotional sharing and compassionate witnessing. It may enhance the ability to enter dialogue, not as an exchange of opinions but as a nurturing experience of belonging, attunement, and resonance. SSD might enhance the capacity for resonance with the world, restoring open-hearted, caring, and compassionate relationships. We also explored the potential contribution of SSD to the effectiveness of presencing—a claim that has not yet been empirically tested. Since SSD facilitates access to connected consciousness by overcoming the protective mechanisms created by trauma, we argued that it can enhance the capacity for engaging in empathic and generative dialogue. It is currently a small-scale group practice that can be applied at larger scales in organizations to create connectedness and enhance compassion. SSD brings together compassion meditation and a focus on active and compassionate listening, increasing access to connected consciousness. It has the potential to contribute alongside other dialogical approaches to overcoming social architectures of separation by enhancing compassion, resonance, and attunement in groups.

We end our paper with an outline of two limitations and further areas for research. The first limitation is the restricted theoretical scope of this paper which focuses on the practice of a small group, exploring the effects of the practice through inductive analysis. What we hope to address in subsequent research is the use of the practice in organizational teams, testing its contribution to the effectiveness of collaboration and collective creativity. The second limitation—and an interesting area of further inquiry—is the impact of facilitators' own levels of self-awareness, empathy, and compassion on the outcomes of the process. Based on the ideas reviewed here and the experiences of the authors, we believe that SSD is a practice worthy of further investigation.

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