



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

From Dysfunctional Dynamics to Healthy Community

Guest: Martin Aylward

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:09] - Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome. I'm Jaï Bristow, one of your hosts. And today I am very pleased to be welcoming back author and Dharma teacher, Martin Aylward.

Welcome Martin.

Martin Aylward

Hello. Hello.

Jaï Bristow

Hi. So as some of you know, Martin also happens to be my father and therefore I know a bit about your life and I know that you've spent a lot of time living in community.

And today we're going to be talking about group dynamics, which I think is such an important topic on this conference, all about relationships. We talk about a lot about relationship with self, about relationship with family, with partners, with friends, but group dynamics is something that sometimes gets overlooked.

So do you want to start by talking a bit about what you mean when you talk about group dynamics and what kind of groups you want to focus on today?

Martin Aylward

Yeah, sure. So I'm mostly thinking of the ways people get together for a variety of purposes. People, I mean, I've like you say, spent pretty much my whole adult life living in community of one form or another.

So sometimes it's people living together or trying to run a project together or working together in various ways and just like in a family. And in fact, when people get together, even though it's a chosen group of people to live together, work together, do something together, they very often end up replicating the dynamics from their family environment very often.

[00:01:38]

And so people get together with a lot of good intention to work together harmoniously, to live together harmoniously, to care for one another and support one another, et cetera, et cetera. And then very, very, very, very often things get difficult in one or other ways.

And the attempt to deal with things getting difficult in various ways is often to try to talk about it, to process, et cetera. And unfortunately, when people start to talk about it and process, things very often go more wrong rather than less wrong.

So it's sort of, to open up, like what do we tend to do with each other? In... Born out of good intentions, in trying to resolve conflicts in groups, in trying to speak our truth, that's a phrase that's often used, in trying to honor all voices, et cetera, let everybody's view be heard, et cetera.

So what are some skillful things we can do around group dynamics and processing, et cetera? And what are some of the very common things that tend to go wrong?

Jaï Bristow

Brilliant. Well, I'm looking forward to this conversation.

So I can hear about when you're talking about group dynamics, it's a lot from your own experience of communal living. And that's working together, living together and yeah, often it can come in forms of sort of like more alternative forms, you'll run a meditation center and so have had communal living through that and also in other formats that you've talked about.

I myself come from a queer community where often there's also that kind of communal living. And so these sort of sometimes alternative formats of communal living often have also people who were, like you say, lots of good intentions, lots of wanting to connect with and live harmoniously and create something outside of perhaps the mainstream.

And at the same time, it can be tricky when there's not a template on how to navigate those dynamics, so I think it's a fantastic conversation we're about to have.

So let's get started. What are some of the key elements that you find can go wrong? Like what are some of the issues that can arise in these kind of groups?

Martin Aylward

Well, like you say, often groups form in that way in counterpoint to the mainstream or to traditional ways of doing things. So people may have been in family structures that are hierarchical, parents are in charge, telling you what to do as a child and at first that's totally appropriate, when you're small, you kind of need that to happen.

And then you go through adolescence and you may well start to feel resentful. It's actually a natural part of adolescence, actually, to kind of push back against parental boundaries or control, et cetera.

And then work structures are usually organized around hierarchies. You might have a line manager or a boss of some sort, somebody's telling you what to do, et cetera.

[00:04:42]

And so very often when people are trying to form a group with some kind of vision to do something brilliant, something brave, something different, something visionary, there's the wish to... And this is how it often starts, to move beyond these old fashioned structures, hierarchical structures, patriarchal structures, et cetera.

And the first thing that gets thrown out very often is the sense of hierarchy, right? There's a sense that and hierarchy and patriarchy are often actually used somewhat interchangeably here because the way we may have grown up, both home structures and work structures, of course anyone might be in charge but there's very often the sense of a hierarchical structure being a patriarchal structure.

Of course, traditionally there's more men in positions of authority both in family situations and work situations, et cetera. So it's not necessarily that we decided to throw out the men but we tried to throw out the sense of somebody being in charge because we, can all look at our own experience, we've probably seen situations where people have been abusive of, manipulative with, unconscious around their use of power, et cetera.

So understandably, it's like oh, we don't want to do that. And so the attempt very often is to have some kind of different rather than a pyramidal or hierarchical structure, to have a more horizontal structure. We might also call it an inclusive structure, a structure where everybody's heard, there may be the attempt to have some kind of consensus decision making, et cetera.

And I think it's really important not to underestimate the good vision of that. We want everybody to be included. We want everyone's voice to be heard. We don't want somebody using and abusing power. We don't want somebody dictating the ways things should be done, et cetera.

So far so good sounding. The problem is that there's often a mistaking of as if hierarchy equals abuse of power. And because we may have seen it done that way, we may have felt ourselves to be manipulated or oppressed by hierarchical structures, et cetera.

But of course the advantage of a hierarchical structure and when it's done well, that means when the person in charge isn't manipulative, is actually willing to listen to other people, is inclusive of all views, et cetera, the very great advantage of a hierarchical structure is somebody holds the kind of responsibility, not just the authority, but has to then hold... Not just the authority but also the responsibility to kind of have a final decision that everyone can get behind, and we say okay, we're doing it like that. Like we know what's happening.

And if you don't have anybody that's willing to be in charge and able to be in charge and somebody that others are trusting of and willing to give their kind of trust to, then you get this sort of endless process of people, we're all trying to decide things together, we're all trying to have our views be met. And if somebody disagrees, oh, we can't do it.

And what happens out of the vision of trying to have an inclusive structure, you sort of end up gravitating, and I've seen this really so many times, gravitating to a kind of lowest common denominator.

[00:08:31]

Which means you end up... If you can only move forward with something everybody agrees on, you won't get something that's very visionary often. You won't get something that has edge, that has growth potential, that has kind of challenge, that has daring to it.

Because if you get something that feels a little risky, somebody's going to feel uncomfortable with. And if anybody who feels uncomfortable about anything has a kind of veto power on the group you can tend to end up with something very very safe in theory, but also kind of very small and possibly even then bland.

So you end up with either bland agreement or something a bit more visionary but then a lot of disagreement. So that's one way of sort of opening it up.

Jai Bristow

Interesting. And I like what you're saying about how honoring that it is a good thing. People wanting to move out of these very sort of oppressive patriarchal dictatorial formats that they might have grown up in whether through their own family or just the societies we live in, the messages, work environments.

That actually wanting to move away from that isn't what you're saying is the problem, right? Wanting to move away from that is a very good thing. It's just because there aren't the templates, then people sometimes move so far away from that that they end up pushing out all the things that do actually work in those structures.

Like the idea of having someone who can take responsibility and facilitate. Having... I came up yesterday, I was talking to someone and he came up with the term a sort of hierarchical democracy.

But then I realized in democracy we do have hierarchy, right? So it's not that the one person takes the power and dominates and tells everyone what they should do, whether you agree or not. But it's about having someone kind of facilitate be responsible for, and I think in today's society, in a lot of at least governments and stuff that's actually been twisted, the idea of what democracy is sometimes doesn't always work so well.

But so what I'm hearing and what you're saying is that it's great to have everyone's voice want to be heard. But if everyone's voice, if everyone has veto power to make decisions, then actually it's very hard to make decisions because each individual is going to have their own stuff, their own insecurities.

And so if it's not just, okay, we go with the majority or whatever, but it's like everyone needs to agree. We need to have unified 100% agreement, then it's actually really hard to evolve, to do something new and exciting and creative because, yeah, each person has their stuff, their traumas, their history, their ideas, their visions, the ways that they want to do things.

So what do you suggest instead?

[00:11:17] - Martin Aylward

And what happens of course is you get very bogged down. I mean, when you've got to hear every view from every person, it's been so long, and again, I've seen this many, many times, and probably anyone who's been involved in these kind of groups will see what happens is you get bogged down in process.

Because as soon as somebody has an objection, oh, everyone's voice needs to be clear. We've got to honor that, we want to listen to that, et cetera. But people can have an endless amount of objections and some of the objections are much more about the person's own truculence or reactivity or subtle power dynamics that are going on in the room or just their need to impose themselves than they might have to do about the actual issue.

So that's one difficulty, another one is just the sense and this is kind of controversial but I don't think it should be. It's kind of controversial in those kinds of flattened or horizontal structures. Not all views are equal.

So we can say oh, all people are equal. That's a nice sentiment but not all views are equal. Some people have an informed view about something and some people have an uninformed view.

So if you're talking about, you might be debating some step to take or some policy to implement or some project to agree upon or some budget... And some people in the situation in the group may have really studied that, thought about the implications, as well as then some people might actually be the ones who will bear the responsibility for what happens.

And then other people, they've got a view, but it may be an emotional view, it may be a view that's formed without having access to a lot of the information others have. It may be a view that they can offer, but whatever happens, they're not going to be responsible for it.

So it's really important to recognize, oh, we might listen to everybody. Let's go around. Everyone have a view, but we're not going to take on board everybody's view. It's one thing to just be able to just say what you think. It's another thing to have the idea that your view should count.

And I know that can sound controversial, but I think it's really important to the successful flow of organizations that we let the views count more of the people who are going to be implementing the thing, have more information about the thing, and ultimately have the responsibility for the thing.

So there's that sense right, of authority and responsibility having to go together in group structures. If somebody holds the authority for something but doesn't take responsibility for it, that's a disaster, right, because they can lay down the law and not bear the consequences.

So authority without responsibility goes very wrong. But it also happens the other way. If you give somebody the responsibility for something but you won't give them the authority over it, that also goes wrong. It's not fair for somebody to have to be responsible for this project or this budget or whatever it is, but without having the authority to make the decisions.

So if I want to keep the authority but I'll give you the responsibility, it sounds good, I'll give you the responsibility for that, but I'm keeping the authority. Oh, no, that definitely doesn't work. That's definitely not fair.

[00:14:40] - Jaï Bristow

Yeah, there's a lot of interesting things in what you're saying. I just want to rewind a little bit to when you were saying the idea that everyone is equal is perhaps a nice sentiment, but everyone's opinions might not be equal or as informed.

So I think it's more than a nice sentiment. I mean, my whole work is around inclusivity and the fact that as human beings, we all are born and should have the same equal access to rights, to resources, so that we're all fundamentally equal as human beings.

And then I also hear what you're saying about the different opinions aren't all equal. And the image that comes to mind in what you were describing is like, for example, if there's a group project to build a house and one person's a plumber and one person's an electrician, and then everyone in the group wants to have an opinion about how the plumbing is done when some people have... Know not the first thing about plumbing or about electricity or whatever it is.

So then of course it makes sense that the plumber takes charge of the plumbing and people might say, oh, there's these couple of options. We can do it this way, and those are the repercussions. Or we can do it that way, and those are the repercussions.

Some people might say, oh, I want the more natural thing, or I want this toilet, or I want that sink, or whatever. And so there can be opinions within them, but there's someone who has more knowledge and more expertise and therefore takes responsibility as well, if something goes wrong, it's also the plumber who fixes it in that scenario, right?

Martin Aylward

So authority and responsibility and power basically, then, is context specific, right? Because people know more in different... So you can have, everyone's equal. That's nice. That's true. That's good. But it depends on the context, right?

So the plumber and the roofer, equal in the group, and they're equal when you going out to dinner or whatever, but then when it comes to fixing the bathroom, they're not equal. And when it comes to mending the roof, they're not equal.

Jaï Bristow

Well, I'd say their opinions are possibly not equal, or their experience is not equal, or the power that they should have within that conversation is not equal. But that doesn't make them, as people, unequal.

Martin Aylward

Yeah, exactly. But that's where the confusion arises, right? We want them to be equal as people. That's an important, beautiful sentiment, but then we forget that when the context shifts, they're not.

When they're up on the roof, their view isn't equal. When they're down in the bathroom, their view isn't equal. If you and I talk about Buddhist meditation, our view isn't equal. And if we talk about queer politics, our view isn't equal.

[00:17:15]

So one of us needs to listen to the other more, depending on the context that we're in. And that's really important when it comes to group dynamics, because we get hung up on the fact that, but everybody's equal. Yes, but their view isn't.

Jai Bristow

And I think that's super important, that idea of it's about context, right? So if we take the example of the plumber and the electrician and the roofer, depending on the conversation topic, the plumber will take charge when it's about plumbing, but then might keep more quiet and not be able to give as much opinion about roofing or electricity or whatever.

And so I think you've made some really important points, and I interviewed Dr. Betty Martin in this conference about, we were talking actually about boundaries, but she was talking about know, we each have that kind of a right to our inner world, whether it's our thoughts, our feelings, what we eat, that kind of thing. But we also have a responsibility for our inner world.

And people so often want to separate what they have the right for and what they're responsible for. And so I think you're talking in group dynamics, and it's a different context, but that same thing of taking responsibility alongside the authority and that it's okay to have hierarchies and that they'll be dependent on context.

It's not just, okay, one person always has final say over everything, all the time. You might have a project manager who has more final say over different things, but that yeah.

So I think those are really important points for people to remember that responsibility and authority that you said, the fact that it's context dependent, and the fact that you can have the belief that everyone is equal, which I very much do, and that is my work, whilst also recognizing that each person is unique and has their unique experiences, their unique knowledge, has their unique skills.

And I, for example, in my work, often talk about equitable equality with the idea that equitable, like equity, is about focusing on the individual's needs and capacities and limitations. And equality is more sort of grouped... Like groups and making sure that everyone has equal rights and equal access to resources and that kind of thing.

So what do you suggest then, as solutions? We've talked a bit about the problems that can arise in these group dynamics. How do we then navigate that? How do people who are starting out a community or already living in community or have an idea and are encountering some of these issues that we've touched upon, what do you suggest?

Martin Aylward

Yeah, well, three things, just sort of thinking out loud as I go along and listening to you now. Three things, firstly, recognizing that context specificity, right?

Because actually, in the example that you came up with of building a house, it's really easy for the roofer and the plumber to recognize that they've got different areas of expertise.

[00:20:12]

But some of the kind of group dynamics I've been involved in and exposed to is much less easy for people to recognize, because we might have a sense we're going along together, we're co creating something together. And those lines aren't so clearly drawn in terms of different areas of expertise.

So just actually establishing that, like, who's the most important person to listen to here in this group for this particular discussion, or for this particular aspect of the project.

And actually, in a healthy group, it'll be different people depending on the activity, because you want to have different areas of expertise. So that's the first thing is like figuring out, okay, not all views or all opinions are equal in this situation. Who do we want to really listen to?

We'll make you room for everyone's view because also somebody who might not have any particular expertise is perfectly capable of coming up with a brilliant idea that nobody else has thought of sometimes.

And that whole thing of thinking out of the box. So sometimes the plumber, to go back to that same example, is so used to thinking in a certain way because the plumber is so used to, oh, we do this and then we do that, and we connect that to that, and it may be that somebody else says, well, how about if we put that over there, would that work? And suddenly the plumber is like, oh amazing. So it's useful to have these sort of left field inputs, but then we have to defer to the plumber about whether to implement, that's the first.

The second thing is really about facilitation in some way. That if you make everybody equal, that's a really bad way of sharing. So if we're not so much the practical stuff, but when we want to actually just say how we're feeling, some difficulties we're having, some maybe interpersonal conflict that's arisen in the group and we say, well, let's get together and we all share how we're feeling.

Oh God, please don't, please don't do that. Don't just share how you're feeling with each other because what's going to get aired? People, difficult things, painful things are going to get aired. Now, it's good that we get to air and share painful things.

But you need to have in that situation, you need to have somebody who is not just equal, not just part of the circle, somebody who can actually hold the space, somebody who can step in if somebody starts to say something that's actually aggressive or hurtful.

Somebody who can point out to people that, what you were just saying about how to navigate the sense of the right to have your experience, and the responsibility around how you hold your experience, how you communicate the experience, et cetera.

Somebody who's facilitating, who can help the people in the group to understand how much of what's being aired and shared might need an external response, an organizational response, a rulemaking response, an agreement response, et cetera.

And how much of it might be really just about the person doing their own internal work, about recognizing their reactivity or et cetera, helping them to kind of stay present enough to connect it to something that may well be a life pattern for them, that they're responding to the group, for

example, as if it was their family and the kind of unresolved emotional stuff around power or blame or whatever might be coming to the surface, et cetera.

[00:23:46]

So that's a really big one. The sense of if you're going to start sharing your inner life as a wish to support each other and to process just the stuff that comes up in group dynamics, we work together and then I start to feel a little bit unheard or misunderstood or left out in some ways, and that feels painful, and it's good that I get a place to share that right.

But yeah, so important that we don't do that on a purely equal footing because then there's a lot of scope for things going wrong and not much scope for them resolving because we can't just all equally all process each other's material. It just gets really charged.

And that's what I've seen many, many times, is you start off trying to air and share and resolve difficulties and resentments and you end up amplifying them because we hear everybody's resentments, oh, I feel like this, and I feel that you didn't listen to me and I feel that you don't care about this, and it's like, oh now we all know, all the resentments that are in the room and there's nobody there to help us actually hold them, inquire into them, give space to them, stop blaming each other and start actually taking a little more responsibility, et cetera.

So that's the second thing.

Jaï Bristow

Yeah, I was just going to ask, I hear the importance of having a facilitator in that context. Would you suggest that that facilitator be someone who's part of the group and community or be someone external?

Martin Aylward

It depends, right? It can be somebody who's part of the community if everybody really trusts that person, but if they're really completely part of the community, well, the chances are they've got their own complaints, grievances, difficulties, and that if people feel that they've got kind of private allegiances within that group, then it's hard for them to be trusted.

So if the person doing the facilitating is part of the group, it's probably most helpful if they actually occupy a different role. What it probably means is a different hierarchical role.

So that comes on to the third point I wanted to say, and it doesn't have to be a different hierarchical role, but they just need to be outside of that collective, really in some way, so they're operating in a different part.

And ideally, it would be somebody who that's their skill. So just like if the plumber has their skill and the roofer has their skill, facilitation is a real skill. You don't just call on somebody, oh, can you come and facilitate our gathering? It's like, does the person know about, really know about that...

Was it Dr. Betty Martin? Was that the person you mentioned? Does this person facilitating really know about what that is? That navigating between rights and responsibilities, between holding

one's inner process and what one adds to the outer process, et cetera. So, yeah, that's the second thing, skillful facilitation.

[00:27:00]

And then the third piece is around actually recovering the goodness of hierarchy. And what that means is, so we started off with these so called pathological, or dominator hierarchies, unhealthy hierarchies, manipulative hierarchies, and then we don't want that.

And so we moved to this attempt to have a more equal and inclusive and horizontal structure. And then at some point we realize, oh, it's really good to have somebody in charge.

When I talk about recovering hierarchy, it's recovering the fact that there can be a way in which we listen to each other, but we actually agree to defer the authority and responsibility to somebody.

And the ingredients of that are that we all want to feel that we do actually really trust the skills and the intentions of the person to whom we're giving authority. We trust their skills to implement what's doing and to take responsibility. We trust their intentions and their capacities.

And then what's important for the person who is holding that is that there's the willingness to actually take the decision when it needs it and even when that's a difficult or unpopular decision.

But there's also the willingness to really, really listen to people and listen to people's views, listen to what's important for people, listen to what people want, and also listen to feedback about oneself as the person in the authority position.

And then you start to... And it's very relieving, I would say to everybody, actually, to live and work in a system where there's a really healthy hierarchy.

Where you feel like the person in charge is really willing to listen to what I have to say, and you hear the person in charge say, oh, thank you for that. Yeah, I'm really going to think about that. Or you hear the person in charge apologize, well it's true, I could have done that differently. Thanks for bringing it to my attention, et cetera.

But also to feel the dynamism and the efficiency and the kind of the movement where you can get together and you can explore and you can discuss and you can air and share grievances, et cetera.

And then you can also, at some point when you get bogged down, somebody's able to decide and move us forward. And there's something just very relieving, especially if you've spent some time, some months or years or decades bogged down in that more kind of horizontal, endless processing and rather frustrating decision making where decisions very often don't get made, or the decisions that do get made are only the ones that can take into account everybody's stated view.

Jaï Bristow

No, I really hear these points you're making about how to create a healthy hierarchy, healthy group dynamics, having a facilitator, being clear on people's roles and naming where people are the experts. The plumber equivalent to a different dynamic than building a house.

[00:30:25]

And I'm brought to reflect upon the conversation I had with Sarah Payton, who was talking about one of the ways of recognizing a healthy relationship is their genuine curiosity, curiosity in each other.

So, like you say, a healthy hierarchy, the person at the top isn't just imposing their will on everyone. There's a genuine curiosity of what is the best thing for the group and that responsibility, of ultimately they make the decisions. And if the decision goes wrong, or if it was the wrong decision, then they take that responsibility, they apologize, they learn, they listen.

And so it's a hierarchy, but it's not the person just doing it based on their own personal will and desire. It's still focusing on the goodness and the well being of the group at large.

Martin Aylward

Yeah, and the wish actually to empower others with authority and responsibility as well. The dominator hierarchy is often born out of the person at the top of that actually feeling a little insecure in various ways and needing to affirm I'm the one in charge.

And then that need to be listened to or that need to be in charge filters down in those various unhealthy ways or oppressive ways, right, imposing the will on the others.

Whereas if the person at the top of the hierarchy is empowered by the others, we believe in you, we trust you, we see that your authority and your responsibility goes together. We hear you taking advice and listening to us, et cetera, that helps the person at the top actually just inhabit that person, plus the person at the top having the kind of clarity or wisdom or capacity to deal with their own insecurity when it arises, rather than needing to feed off others for it.

And then the wish to let others actually excel at the areas they're brilliant at. And you see that functioning in a good... So the model that I was most exposed to as healthy hierarchy is what I like to call, and again, the name might go over a little strangely, but benevolent dictatorship or enlightened dictatorship.

And that's basically the Asian monastery model. In the Buddhist monasteries that I spent time in, in Thailand particularly, you have that sense that the abbot or the founding teacher, the wise elder who is in charge, is in charge, basically because it's universally recognized that they are the wisest person in the place.

And I know that's a little different, certainly it's different in a corporate structure. People aren't there because they're the wisest person.

Jaï Bristow

Although they might be there because they have the most experience or years of experience.

Martin Aylward

They might or they might be there because they're the progeny of whatever the nepotistic or educational advantage or all the rest of it.

[00:33:36]

But that model of what we could call enlightened dictatorship, it's the sense that there's... Of course, it's still open to abuse, because if I talk about a spiritual hierarchy, plenty of examples of gurus and cult leaders and priests and all kinds of other people who would have a place atop a spiritual hierarchy that end up misusing and abusing it, right?

So I'm not trying to paint some rosy image of spiritual hierarchies. But when that works well, when you've got somebody who is authentically wise, generous, compassionate and visionary, which is generally how something gets formed, some new monastery forms, because you've got somebody who's wise, compassionate and visionary.

People can be wise and compassionate, but not visionary. And then they'll find their place within an existing structure and maybe they'll rise to the top of that structure, right, because they're wise and we want to invest them, let this wise and compassionate person lead us.

But if someone's wise and compassionate and visionary, they will tend to break out of an existing structure and establish their own to serve that vision.

And all through history, you see that if you take the figure of Christ as the founder of... He wasn't really founding Christianity at the time, but he was just expressing that vision to do something in a new way.

Or you take Amma, the hugging saint of India, who's created this extraordinary situation all around her, and it's because she was a visionary, she had this completely different way of doing things. So she'd grown up within an existing structure built around practices of wisdom and compassion, but then she has this thing, oh, I'm going to hug people as a way of transmitting love and blessing, et cetera.

So then you get a new system form. So when it's working well, the model of spiritual hierarchy is actually beautiful because you're investing the person who's running the thing and the person that people are trusting and following not just with experience or skill, but there's actually a sense of a kind of more transcendent vision, a sense that the person who's leading us and guiding us actually has access to some clarity and understanding that surpasses our own and that can bring us along with them.

And that's the one that's most open to abuse. It's the one that's most likely to go wrong in a way, because you're investing somebody, you're saying, oh, I trust that you have access to some understanding that I do not.

So it can really go wrong. And yet when it functions, when the person in charge is genuinely deserving of that level of trust, beautiful things can happen. And the history of various spiritual traditions and communities is the history of both types of that, the beautiful versions of that and the deeply going wrong versions.

Jai Bristow

I'm glad you mentioned how it can be really beautiful and how it can go wrong, because that was going to be one of my questions about what happens when the leadership is more dictatorial without the enlightenment behind, right?

[00:36:56]

I'm aware of time, but there's a few things in what you've said that I really want to touch upon. So one of the things is you're talking about spiritual hierarchies, spiritual communities, how can what you're talking about be applied to more like... I've forgotten how to say that in English. More secular than group dynamics.

Martin Aylward

Well, we've touched on these basic qualities, right? It's important to have somebody who you can trust can lead in some way. And it's important that if you feel you're going to invest somebody with that capacity to lead, that they feel trustworthy, that without it being a spiritual hierarchy, you have some sense that they know how to take responsibility for themselves.

They know how to take responsibility for their own reactivity. One example is that is it somebody who can admit when they've done something wrong? Is it somebody who's able to listen? Is it somebody who's able to apologize? Right?

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic.

Martin Aylward

Now, they also need to be able to be decisive and kind of courageous, and they need to know when they've listened enough and say, okay, enough. We're going to do this.

And that's the potent combination. Somebody who can be decisive and exercise real leadership, but can also listen, apologize and kind of be humble, really.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you. And I'm curious for that person because there might be people who are listening who have that role in a community or taking on that role. And you talked about how peer sharing can become toxic if it's not facilitated. So that person is probably usually the facilitator.

Where do they then go and work on their stuff if it's not within the group itself?

Martin Aylward

Yeah, well, it depends on the organization, right? But yes, ideally that person would have either some peer support themselves.

So, for example, in that Buddhist world, I belong to a couple of different sort of collegiate bodies that are all people who are leading communities, leading monasteries or meditation communities, et cetera.

And so that's the thing with the person who's at the top of a hierarchy is a lonely position because he's only you up the top there and lower down you've got all kind of collegiate peer relationships.

[00:39:31]

So it's very important that the person at the top... And there's no position lonelier than to go back to the spiritual hierarchy position, the guru. The one that's invested these great power, is very lonely.

And that's often I think it's out of that loneliness, in a way, that some of the power abuses, financial abuses, sexual abuses come, right? With the person kind of despite whatever charisma and clarity and wisdom they may have that got them there in the first place, finding themselves lacking in real peership.

We all want peership of some kind, whether that's an equal relationship, a symmetrical relationship is a really important and precious one.

Whether that's in a romantic relationship, the place where you really just get to be yourself in a way that's naked and unfiltered, where you can both be held by another and you can hold the other. That's what makes it a peer relationship, an equal relationship.

Sometimes I'm caring for you, sometimes you're caring for me. And across the interchange of that, we feel like we're caring for each other. And so if you're the person at the top of any given structure, it's really important that you have that somewhere else.

And that may be just as a life partner or something outside of that structure. Or it may be that it's with other people, sort of networks of other people that also lead organizations, et cetera. It may be that you have some kind of coach yourself, but it has to be somebody who you really trust is willing to not just say what you want to hear, but somebody who's willing to call you on your possible own blindnesses, et cetera.

Jaï Bristow

Brilliant. And that leads me to my last question, which is about do you believe there can be healthy group dynamics and group sharings that aren't facilitated, for example, support groups?

Or like sometimes you have like I know there's men's groups, I'm in a non monogamy support group. There's all these kind of things where they're peer support groups, but they're not necessarily groups that live and work together.

Martin Aylward

Yeah, really important, thank you. It would have felt very incomplete to not add this bit in before we left, so yes, definitely.

So what makes the difference? And it is to do with the living. Like if I belong to a men's group, and these men get together and we work in different situations and we're in different kinds of relationships or not relationship or whatever, and we get together once a week or once a month or whatever, and we talk about our lives, but we don't know that much about each other's lives.

So I'm talking about, oh, this is going on in my relationship, and this is going on in my work. And my brothers in this men's group can hear me and feel me and acknowledge me, and they can share what's going on with them.

[00:42:23]

And we all feel heard and met and seen and loved, and then we go home to our lives. And that's a great support.

The reason that works though is that we don't know much about the other people we're talking about. You see what I mean? I'm talking about oh, my husband or my wife or my colleagues that are over there, they're just abstract, they're just names in this group.

But if you're sharing with people and the people that you're living and working with are also the people you're sharing about, that's when you've got to have the facilitation.

So it's that sense of when you're sharing about things that are extrinsic to the group, then it's a real support to be able to do that. And that can be in any situation, a men's group, cancer group, a queer group, any kind of support, but when the people and the subject matter that you're sharing about is intrinsic to the group, shut up or get some facilitation.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you for that wonderful ending line. No, I think it's really important what you're saying, that the issue isn't group dynamic or peer sharing, right?

And again, the issue is very much when you live in a group and you're sharing about the dynamics coming up with each other without someone to help guide that sharing and without someone to point out this is a you problem, your internal life or your issues to work on individually and it's having an impact on the group versus this is something that needs to be looked at in the group versus all that kind of thing that you've mentioned.

Martin Aylward

Yeah. And it doesn't even have to be about whether you're living and working together, right? It might be that a support group of any kind starts off talking about this extrinsic stuff but as you get to know each other over time, you start to create relationship and dynamics.

You start to get to know each other. And at some point, if you're not careful, you switch and you're talking less and less about the extrinsic stuff of your life and more and more about the intrinsic stuff of your group. And that's where it gets tricky.

That's where the groups start to go wrong. That's where resentments and blames arise because you've made the subject matter intrinsic now and you don't have any facilitation.

And it used to be that you didn't need facilitation because you were talking about extrinsic stuff and you could just hear each other and now you're wondering why it's all going wrong.

And it used to be so good, this group. So you want to hang on to it. But the more you hang on to it and the more difficulties arise and the more you share the difficulties and the more the difficulties are about the other people in the group and the more messy it gets.

[00:45:06] - Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. I think that's a really important distinction to make, how it can go from one to the other. They're not completely separate, right?

Especially as a group gets to know each other, people might start dating each other, might start hanging out outside of the group together. And then that's when we go back to the beginning of the talk and we can bring in facilitators, we can assign roles and we can continue the group, but just recognize that the format has changed and implement, hopefully...

Martin Aylward

Or ditch the group. I mean, that's the other thing, it's knowing when a group has outlived its usefulness. At some point when the groups become too immersed, too complicated, too many psychodynamics, you just bow. It's like, oh, yeah, I love you, you've been helpful, I'm out of here.

Jaï Bristow

Brilliant. Thank you. And last question. I know I said the last one was the last one, but from which how many numbers is a group? Because what you've discussed, is that true when you're living two or three, is it true in a family of four?

At what point do we need to start being aware of these group dynamics and this lack of or need for hierarchy, positive hierarchy or bringing in off negative hierarchy?

Martin Aylward

It can be a group of two, right? I mean, you see how couples get into just the same old dynamics. There's the love for each other, there's the wish to resolve issues, but you end up just going round and round and round, the same old dynamics. And so you go to couples therapy.

So in a way, that's an example of a group dynamic that you can't manage on your own because you are just peers and all your stuff is intrinsic that you're talking about. And so you need to go outside that to a therapist for couples therapy. So I would say, yeah, two is the minimum size for a group.

Jaï Bristow

Okay, brilliant. Thank you so much for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Martin Aylward

You probably mostly at my website, martinaylward.com. There's a lot of recorded teachings there and details of the retreats I teach and of the community where I live, which is generally pretty healthy, flourishing, well flowing along community. And then you can find me on [Instagram @martinaylward](https://www.instagram.com/martinaylward).

Jaï Bristow

Brilliant. Thank you.

[00:47:10] - Martin Aylward

Thank you.