

UNITED WISDOM

An inward argument with someone who is not there

Human Nature and Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“without a purpose”*
>
> *Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, IV.2, George Long translation; fragment of his warning against purposeless action.*

What this article is about

The meeting ended three hours ago. You are washing a cup and finally discover the reply you should have given. The other person appears in an inward scene, repeats the earlier sentence, receives your precise argument, objects, and loses. Then the scene starts again: one more point needs proving. The actual person has long been occupied with another life. Your attention, however, continues to serve a conversation in which both voices belong to you.

Such an argument may be preparation, an attempt to understand what happened, a way of expressing unexpressed anger, or simply a habitual return to an important episode. One everyday scene cannot establish its cause or identify someone as ill. This article asks a different question: what task does inward dialogue perform, why does winning it not always settle a conflict, and how can its result return to accessible life? We distinguish memory, an imagined answer, an actual request, and a choice of distance. Ending an argument need not mean forgiving, agreeing, or meeting again. Sometimes it means preserving an important objection and ceasing to demand an answer from an absent person when only our own version of their voice can currently supply it.

I. One participant plays both roles in this scene

An external conversation can surprise us. Someone may admit an error, change the subject, misunderstand a question, or bring a new fact. An inward argument is usually arranged differently: we already have both sides' lines available. Even a harsh response from the imagined opponent is produced by our attention and memory. It may be plausible, but it does not become a new message from the actual person. That is why inward dialogue can be detailed while adding almost no information about what is happening between us now.

It helps to distinguish three materials. First, what was actually said, as far as we remember it. Second, what we would like to answer. Third, what we imagine in response to our new answer.

The third material is particularly easy to mix with the first. After several repetitions, someone feels as though the other person has already refused to acknowledge an argument, although the argument was never presented to them. An imagined response acquires the emotional weight of another event and can change our attitude without new external contact.

This is not an accusation of fabrication. Imagination works with important experience and sometimes helps formulate speech. Formulating something, however, differs from obtaining information. If several repetitions yield a clear question, a record, or a plan of action, the inward conversation may have done preparatory work. If each new answer merely requires another, it helps to notice that this test has no external addressee. Winning inwardly cannot oblige the real person to acknowledge that you are right. They have not yet participated in this version of the meeting.

The illustrative scene at the sink becomes clearer if we ask what precisely we consider unfinished. Do I need to name an injustice? Receive an apology? Recover the right to disagree? Discuss a work-related fact? These tasks require different exits. A sentence that protects dignity may be useful without an external continuation. A work error, conversely, needs correcting in a document or agreement. Naming the unfinished task more precisely gives us fewer reasons to demand that a single inward victory solve every task simultaneously.

II. An unanswered remark may preserve a real objection

Sometimes the inward argument returns because we conceded something we did not agree with. We smiled, changed the subject, or pretended the remark did not hurt. Later our own voice emerges. It may contain a substantive objection that should not immediately be dismissed as pointless brooding. A manager claimed someone else's work; someone close decided for you; a participant interrupted and declared your position unserious. Being able to formulate an objection restores the difference between what happened and your agreement with it.

But a substantive objection need not come with an endless trial. You can record: I disagree with the appropriation of this result; restoring authorship matters to me; the next step is to correct the record. The inward voice gains form and an addressee. It need not prove that the person is always dishonest, that everyone around must see this, and that the previous conversation can be conducted again perfectly. The broader the demand for justice, the easier it is for one episode to occupy the entire inward day. A precise demand preserves what matters without declaring the whole world obliged to confirm it immediately.

There are cases in which the objection can no longer be presented. The person died, contact ended, or no safe channel exists. This does not make the objection insignificant. You may acknowledge it yourself, write it down, or discuss it with someone you trust. An imagined

apology, however, does not become an actual apology, and its inward absence does not prove a new refusal. We can preserve an injustice as a historical fact and separately decide what participation of that history in the present is available. Such a choice need not be called forgiveness or become another moral obligation.

Sometimes it helps to finish a sentence without the opponent's reply: “In that situation I was treated this way; I do not consider it acceptable.” A full stop acknowledges your position without declaring the conflict settled for everyone. Actual consequences may require further action, but they acquire a separate place. Inward argument ceases to be the only way to remain faithful to your objection. You can preserve the truth of an event without continually reproducing an imagined scene in which truth once again requires someone else's permission.

III. Victory and recognition are different results

You can assemble an impeccable argument in an inward scene and still feel no completion. Perhaps the task was not the argument. You needed this particular person to acknowledge the significance of what happened. A voice you create yourself cannot replace that recognition. Even imagined surrender proves insufficient: you know the other person said nothing. So the argument starts again, as though a still more precise formulation could finally make the inward result external.

The distinction hurts because it reveals the limit of our own power. We can write a letter, request a conversation, or state a condition for continuing a relationship. We cannot secure someone else's sincere remorse. We can convincingly demonstrate a documentary error, but cannot guarantee the person will stop defending themselves or change their attitude. Inward argument sometimes conceals this limit: while choosing the perfect argument, we feel the outcome depends solely on our skill with words. Recognising the limit restores choice, although it does not always provide comfort. It lets us decide how much further effort makes sense.

It matters not to confuse the absence of recognition with the absence of your own position. If the other person has not apologised, your assessment need not disappear. If they disagree, you need not keep proving your case until exhaustion. You can retain a difference of opinion and change the conditions of contact. Sometimes a conflict remains unfinished in the sense of mutual agreement but finished in the sense of your participation: you did what was available, stated a boundary, and stopped an unproductive discussion. This is a real form of completion, although it differs from the scene of shared justice you hoped to receive.

For a check, ask what would count as a sufficient answer and whether such an answer could arrive at all. If sufficiency keeps moving—acknowledging the fact is not enough, they must also understand your pain, explain the whole past, and guarantee the future—perhaps one

conversation has received too many tasks. You can divide them. One is answered by a document, another by a new agreement, a third by time and observation, and a fourth cannot currently be resolved. Division does not devalue wanting to be heard. It makes that desire visible separately from an impossible demand to repair an entire history in one conversation.

IV. Historical texts do not require forgetting harm

In Marcus Aurelius's Meditations, IV.3 and IV.24, translated by Long, inward return concerns ordering thought and removing what is unnecessary. This is a Stoic moral practice, rather than research into repeated arguments. We borrow a question about thought's purpose while keeping distance from the proposition that external things cannot harm the soul. For a contemporary reader, the actual consequences of someone's actions are not cancelled by correct judgment. Inner peace is not a condition that must precede restoring justice.

In the Dhammapada, verses 3–5, F. Max Müller's SBE X translation, remembering an injury is considered in relation to continuing hostility. This is Buddhist ethical instruction within a religious frame, rather than a requirement to acknowledge violence as nonexistent. The old translation's word love cannot provide a precise foundation for a modern obligation to love someone who harmed you. Our comparison is limited to asking which action continues to sustain inward hostility. It does not cancel protection, testimony, or the responsibility of the person who caused harm.

Stoic ordering of judgment and Buddhist cessation of hostility resemble one another in attending to one's own participation. Their aims, understandings of the person, and religious foundations nevertheless differ. We cannot turn them into a shared, scientifically proven recipe that letting go will make everything disappear. A more honest meeting of sources asks whether I can preserve memory and a boundary without performing another inward act of war now. The answer may be unclear. Even a useful question creates no obligation immediately to achieve the condition a source advocates.

Imagine stopping an inward argument after humiliation in a work conversation but not reporting a violation. This is not necessarily a good result: a necessary external correction may remain undone. Imagine the reverse: you secured correction of the record but still feel angry. This is not necessarily failure: the action is complete while the feeling remains. Historical moral instruction, external restoration, and a change of experience are three different processes. Distinguishing them avoids requiring one change automatically to confirm two others or calling someone immature because a feeling remains.

V. Distance changes the viewpoint without cancelling experience

The abstract by Ayduk and Kross, 2010 describes three studies of spontaneous distancing and associations with lower reactivity. The entire protocol was not read. Our everyday question below is an editorial proposal, not a universally suitable or individually proven procedure.

You might ask what an external listener knows from your record. They will hear the event, words, your objection, and the desired result. They do not yet know the other person's hidden motives or future answers. This position sometimes helps reveal where the account added material absent from the meeting itself. It matters not to turn an external view into a cold trial of yourself. Feeling remains part of the case, rather than an error an objective observer must remove. Distinguishing fact and experience does not require abandoning either.

A further question is what accessible task you would see if someone close told this story. Perhaps another speech to the opponent is unnecessary; clarification of an agreement, restoration of a record, rest, or acknowledging they no longer want contact is needed instead. Shifting perspective may widen choice. Your answer cannot, however, be assumed correct merely because it comes from a distance. The participant knows circumstances the outside listener does not. Returning to your own life, check the proposal again against actual conditions, resources, and safety.

If changing the viewpoint increases alienation or simply gives nothing, you need not continue for a promised effect. You can use a simpler chronological record or address a concrete external task directly. The article offers no test of psychological maturity. Choosing a method is part of its meaning. We consider inward dialogue as an action with a particular purpose; if a method does not serve that purpose, it can be changed or stopped. We need not require the correct response to every thought on top of a difficult experience itself.

VI. Preparation for a conversation has a finite result

Inward dialogue can help before an actual meeting. It lets us find precise words, notice an accusation concealed in a question, and choose a limit for discussion. Preparation nevertheless needs to differ from endless rehearsal of every answer. It has finite material: observation, position, request, boundary. For example: “Yesterday my name was missing from the results. I did this part of the work. Please correct the record. If we disagree, we can compare documents.” Such speech does not require winning every possible argument about character and intention in advance.

It helps to anticipate two or three significant answers: agreement, disagreement, refusal to discuss. Twenty shades of contempt need not be prepared. For each answer you can identify

the next available step. With agreement, check the correction; with disagreement, refer to the facts; with refusal, choose an established channel or finish participating. This is no strategy for managing another person's feelings. It simply preserves your task in a conversation that may proceed differently. The other person remains a participant able to propose a new option absent from your rehearsal.

Time and conditions also need choosing. A conversation after a sleepless night, in passing, or before an audience may differ from an agreed discussion. Sometimes writing preserves precision; sometimes a live conversation allows more clarification. The choice depends on the task and relationship rather than a general rule of correct communication. If a channel creates risk, preparation may end with a decision not to approach directly. Available professional or organisational assistance should not be replaced by a demand to become a perfect negotiator yourself.

After preparation, you can ask what another inward round will change. If it will merely produce a new imagined remark, preparation is already finished. Its result can be kept in a short note while you return to other activities. This does not promise the thought will cease appearing. A thought returning and needing to work on your speech again are different events. You can notice its return and recall where the prepared request is kept. Prepared material remains available without having to hold it constantly on the inward stage until the meeting.

VII. An unsent letter is not a sent letter

Sometimes it helps to write everything that was not said. In an unsent letter, you can use harsher language than is appropriate externally and acknowledge hurt, contradiction, and the wish for an answer. The letter nevertheless remains personal material until you separately decide to send it. Completeness of expression does not itself make a text suitable for its addressee. It may contain guesses, broad accusations, or impossible demands. Keeping it for yourself is one action; giving it to someone else is another, with its own consequences and responsibility.

If you decide to send it, check the purpose. Do you want to restore a fact, obtain an explanation, state a boundary, or end contact? A text written for inward release may not suit that purpose. Another version can be prepared while preserving the original as a personal record. You might remove predictions about someone's character, name one episode, and formulate one request. This is not censorship of feeling. It chooses a form that needs to work between people, where the other person can answer outside the script and cannot read your entire inward context.

Consider separately the irreversibility of certain actions. A public accusation, forwarding private correspondence, or involving third parties changes the situation more than a personal

note. These actions need not be declared forbidden in general: sometimes testimony and an established channel are necessary. An inward sense of victory, however, does not confirm grounds for publication. Facts, authority, consequences, and the appropriate method require checking. This article discusses ordinary conversational navigation, offers no legal recommendations, and establishes no dispute-resolution procedure for a particular institution.

Sending a letter does not guarantee completion either. No answer may arrive; it may arrive later or differ from what you hoped. It therefore helps to define your own subsequent action for each significant outcome. Otherwise an external channel easily continues endless inward waiting: an actual screen now occupies the imagined interlocutor's place. A clear limit to waiting does not force someone else to respond. It lets you manage your next step while retaining the difference between no answer and an invented explanation of its cause.

VIII. Sometimes completion concerns only our participation

Not every conflict receives a shared resolution. People may disagree in their assessment, not want to continue, or have incompatible conditions. Distinguish an unresolved question from endless personal participation. You can acknowledge: mutual agreement is absent; an accessible fact has been checked; my position has been stated; I will not continue this format. This does not automatically make the other person wrong. It makes your decision visible. The decision may be revised later but need not remain open solely because no shared final scene occurred.

The absence of an ideal witness is especially hard to accept. We want someone to see the whole history exactly as we do and finally restore the meaning of our experience. Sometimes such understanding is possible, sometimes partial, sometimes absent. We can seek support without appointing every listener a judge obliged to issue one verdict. Support may mean attentive presence, help with an action, or acknowledgment of experience without agreement with every explanation. The distinction allows actual help without requiring impossible completeness from it.

Maintaining distance can be a substantive result. If conversations repeatedly bring humiliation or pointless dispute, reducing contact addresses participation without changing the other person. We need not compose a final argument that will at last make them understand. Necessary information can be communicated briefly or through a safe, established method. Sometimes no message is required if no obligations need completing. Actual agreements matter; an inward decision should not be presented as an external change still waiting to be made.

Finishing your participation does not require immediate calm. Thoughts may return after a clear decision. Distinguish memory of the conflict from a new task arising from it. If no new

information exists and the chosen action is complete, memory returning need not reopen discussion. It can be acknowledged as an important experience returning. This is no universal instruction to stop thinking. It permits us not to regard every emerging remark as a compulsory agenda, especially when speech no longer has an addressee able to answer in the present.

IX. Restore the absent person's absence

At the beginning, someone is washing a cup but inwardly still attending the meeting. Now we can notice the actual interlocutor is absent and makes no new remark. This simple observation does not cancel the past encounter. It restores the present moment's own circumstances: water, cup, evening, available activities. We need not make the present into a mindfulness exercise. We can simply notice that imagined conversation and the external setting are different processes and choose which action receives attention now.

If the objection remains unformulated, finish a short record. If a meeting is arranged, keep the request for it. If contact has ended, name your position without another answering remark. If an actual correction is needed, take an accessible step. In each case attention returns through a task, rather than a command to forget. Someone need not prove they are no longer angry before making dinner, working, or speaking to a person who is actually nearby. Other parts of life need not await final inward victory.

A moral aspect also exists: the actual other differs from the role they play in our head. They may have behaved badly and nevertheless need not repeat every imagined remark. Recognising this does not excuse harm. It limits adding new events to old ones. Our attitude can rest on what really happened and what still needs checking. Memory thereby becomes a basis for choice rather than a factory of new confirmations that never left a single mind.

Inward argument loses its monopoly when several ways of handling the unfinished become available. Naming, checking, asking, limiting, preserving, and stopping are different actions. Sometimes time is needed, sometimes help, sometimes one clear sentence. None must erase the whole history. The cup is washed; the meeting remains in the past; an important objection is preserved; the next step is named or consciously not chosen. This modest result restores the right to live further without making every evening a continuation of a conversation whose actual second participant has long been absent.

A prepared request has another useful property: it lets us see whether a new thought concerns the task. A new fact can update the record; changed meeting conditions can prompt a revised method. If only the wish for a final victorious sentence appeared, the available task may remain unchanged. This distinction does not prohibit anger. It avoids giving each new inward argument authority to set the entire real conversation’s agenda again.

What this means in practice

Name one inward argument and divide its material into three parts: what was actually said, your desired answer, and the other person's imagined reply. Qualify your memory if you do not know the precise words. Then identify the task: express a position, correct a fact, request a conversation, establish a boundary, or finish your own participation. Choose one accessible exit. Do not demand recognition, reconciliation, and a guarantee of the future from it simultaneously.

If conversation is needed, prepare an observation, position, request, and limit. If a personal text is needed, keep it separate from the decision to send it. If action is impossible or unsafe, do not turn impossibility into an obligation to argue inwardly forever. You can acknowledge your objection and choose subsequent participation without obtaining the other person's agreement. When a thought returns, check whether new information appeared or only the earlier scene.

After acting, note its actual result. A corrected record does not mean feeling has disappeared; a peaceful evening does not mean external resolution. Distinguish the processes and retain the right to pause. These questions concern ordinary self-description and preparing communication, rather than diagnosis or a promise of treatment. Their usefulness is modestly checked: did they help name a task and restore attention to an available action? If they did not, another method can be chosen without adding an assessment of your supposedly incorrect application of advice to an already difficult experience.

Keep the prepared record available for an actual request. Repeatedly polishing it need not be the condition for going back to the rest of your evening.

Key quotation

> *“the unnecessary things”*
>
> *Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, IV.24, Long; fragment of a question about unnecessary activity, extended in context to thoughts. Stoic necessity does not replace your assessment of particular harm and obligations.*

Connections between traditions

Lines	Similarity	Boundary
Marcus Aurelius ↔ asking about purpose	Thought considered through its work	Stoic invulnerability is not a fact of contemporary psychology
Dhammapada 3–5 ↔ inward argument	Memory can participate in continuing hostility	Buddhist ethics does not cancel protection and testimony
Ayduk/Kross ↔ changing viewpoint	Ways of reflection differ	An abstract does not establish a universal effect
Personal letter ↔ external request	Both express a position	Expression and sending are different actions
Victory ↔ recognition	Both are desired in conflict	Imagined answers do not create actual agreement

Primary sources

• Marcus Aurelius. Meditations, IV.2–3, IV.24, George Long translation, MIT. Selected passages and adjacent context were read; Gutenberg 2680's Casaubon translation was not used as Long.

• Dhammapada, verses 3–5, F. Max Müller translation, Sacred Books of the East X, 1881, PG2017. Verses 1–10 were read; introduction and notes are absent from this digital edition. This is the named nineteenth-century translation.

• Özlem Ayduk, Ethan Kross. From a Distance, 2010, JPSP 98(5), 809–829, DOI 10.1037/a0019205. The abstract was read; the complete protocol is not claimed as read. Rights UNKNOWN; no full republication.

Tags

inward argument, absent person, dialogue, memory, imagination, conflict, recognition, victory, objection, letter, distance, Marcus Aurelius, Dhammapada, Müller, Stoicism, Buddhism, Ayduk, Kross, perspective, boundary, request, completion, participation, present, choice

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