

## **Krishnamurti and Transforming the World's Mind**

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### **Abstract**

For this article, I have adapted a talk I gave for an online conference centering around Jiddu Krishnamurti's scholarship to address the theme of "a world in crisis." I share a narrative of my experience discovering Krishnamurti's work by way of introducing the idea of innate human intelligence as distinct from the mind-led intellect. This distinction is critical to our understanding of how we perceive the world, demonstrating that there are two ways of knowing: one is conceptual, and one is actual, we could say, or beyond concepts.

*Keywords:* non-conceptual awareness, intellect, education, transformation of consciousness, experiential learning, self-awareness, knowing

### **Krishnamurti and Transforming the World's Mind**

For my work in the faculty of education over the past eight years, I have guided myself with the following questions, informed initially by my own questions and then by Jiddu Krishnamurti's work: What does the nature of mind, self, and consciousness mean for the curriculum and pedagogy in education? What is the full possibility of what can be done within education to help students to know themselves and life, thereby contributing to their psychological freedom and to the ability to solve problems in the world? This latter question seems particularly pertinent at this juncture of world events which perhaps seem like impossible problems to solve but that at the same time must be solved for our own lives and life as we know it to continue on this planet.

I write this paper with students in mind, who desire to have some new understanding or new knowledge with which to meet the world's unprecedented challenges at this time. Educators might also find my pedagogic suggestions of interest. Krishnamurti spoke and wrote at length about the cause of humanity's struggles as originating in the confusion of the human mind. Thus, the clarity we seek in solving any crisis in the world is to understand our mind, how it functions, and to transform it. Clearly, formal education is a chance to tackle this kind of learning and so Krishnamurti founded eight schools with this goal in mind, speaking to students and teachers over the course of his life about what the confusion of the mind is, exactly, and how to go about seeing it, thereby transforming it.

This paper is about learning to work with our own mind in order to understand it and therefore ourselves, other people, and life. It is about understanding the limits of the intellect to make sense of the world – its problems and solutions – the necessity of employing intelligence to do that job; it is about seeing the difference between these two phenomena (i.e., intellect and

intelligence), usually understood to be one and the same. I discuss “unlearning,” a term I use to refer to undoing the beliefs the mind has come to think are facts and what place this has in education and in one’s orientation in the world, with the goal of clearly seeing cause and effect and, therefore, solution. I am hopeful this paper can shed light on the mind’s default perception of conflating the events of the world (a pandemic, climate change, racial violence, government violence, etc.) with its (limited) perception of the events – in other words, the assumption that we are perceiving accurately.

### **Discovering the Work and Philosophy of J. Krishnamurti**

It was the summer of 1997. I had just completed my two undergraduate degrees in arts (English literature) and education (my teaching degree) when a friend from my English class wrote me a snail mail letter (this was in the very early days of the internet and email) from the Centre for Learning in Bangalore, India where she was spending the year. She knew I was deeply interested in education and suggested I would very much like the work of the centre’s founder, J. Krishnamurti, and she recommended I find a book or two by him to read. She suggested *Freedom from the Known or Education and the Significance of Life* (a title, which sounded wonderful to me). As it turned out, this was the one book by Krishnamurti in my local library.

Upon reading the first page, I immediately felt a resonance and recognition that was new to me. I have since come to see this recalling—something beyond the intellect—as something that happens to all of us when we are perceiving truth. I found it quite remarkable that I could not actually understand everything that Krishnamurti was saying but that this did not stop me from knowing I was hearing something true. He was speaking about:

- a non-rational, non-conceptual way of knowing that was beyond the realm of thought;
- understanding actually rather than just intellectually;

- fear and the search for psychological security that drives all human action;
- life and all relationship as a reflection of one's internal state of consciousness;
- the transformation of world through the transformation of self;

and all of it in the context of education and schooling.

The book and the insights contained in it had a profound effect on me. It seemed to me to finally be the answers concerning the nature of the life that I had been looking for but had never found in my pursuit through university studies. Krishnamurti was describing my actual life experience that I had only peripherally been aware of, such as the middling anxiety which was my constant companion for as long as I could remember. In essence, he was coalescing my lived experience into a tangible form. He was establishing that my psychological orientation was the same as that of all of humanity's, that it was not *my* mind, but rather *the* mind. Yet this was not all he did: he also posited that this was not a fixed problem, but could in fact be understood and transformed. I had already been highly motivated to understand myself and especially to reach a higher degree—or accuracy—of perception. Reading Krishnamurti offered this possibility.

Reading Krishnamurti also set the trajectory for my life: I went on to complete a master's and PhD, both in education focused on his work, and, more importantly by far, I have endeavoured to understand Krishnamurti's teachings (as he referred to them) actually rather than just intellectually. Indeed, knowing that there are these two distinct ways of experiencing (i.e. through thought and through non-thought), and, being able to discern this difference is the essence of his teachings. As he said, "What is important is in all this is to see not only with the intellect but also with the actual eye" (2006, p.212). When I read Krishnamurti now, I understand far better than I did then; I have noticed within myself the experiences of which he speaks.

From the beginning (i.e. since 1997 when I first began to read Krishnamurti), I have not been interested in being a scholar of Krishnamurti in the sense of knowing about him and his life, being able to know what he said and so on; I understood on some level that in order to actually understand what he meant I needed to experience it for myself—something beyond intellectual understanding. As a basic analogy, this is (the world of) difference between knowing all about bicycles and riding one. (How much of an expert on bicycle-riding could one be if they have never actual ridden one?) So, I took on Krishnamurti’s teachings as though they were directed at me, personally. I endeavoured to get on the bike and ride it as often as it took. If I could not see the fear in myself, the seeking of psychological security, and its effects, and transform it—if I could not live his teachings, then I only could ever claim to know them in theory.

That does not mean that I did not read every Krishnamurti book I could get my hands on and life seemed to always oblige in those years: I found a large cache of them at a used bookstore near my home (then in Ottawa) and even in my small village of Copan Ruinas, Honduras where I lived for a year in 1998 and ’99. There was a small bookstore where travelers would exchange their books so they did not have to carry them unnecessarily while backpacking through Central America. And then again in Guyana, South America, I found *Commentaries on Living* in a new friend’s apartment. It was quite extraordinary. In the paradox that I have come to see as the way of all things, it was Krishnamurti’s teachings that led me to see that I must be my own teacher, as we all must.

### **Understanding Krishnamurti’s Philosophy**

#### **Intellect and Intelligence: The Conceptual and Non-Conceptual Minds**

First, a note about the word “philosophy”: it has come to be known in a general way in society as a way of thinking and a set of beliefs such that it seems synonymous with extensive

thinking and analysis. In this sense, I don't think of Krishnamurti as having a philosophy at all. What he has is clear seeing and observing. Thinking does not enter into it. Yet, when I return to the root meaning of philosophy as the love of wisdom and the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence then discussing "Krishnamurti's philosophy" can make sense.

Ironically, I have found in my work with students, when asking them to read Krishnamurti that this is their consistent complaint: it is very complicated, abstract and intellectual. They find they have to think too hard to try to understand and find it too confusing, especially the dialogues (transcripts of Krishnamurti's talks with (in our case) teachers and students). I suggest to them that in fact what he is pointing to is completely away from thought. He is pointing to experiencing oneself and life without the accumulated concepts of the intellect. I find that saying this helps them to look then to that which he is pointing to, rather than in trying to understand merely conceptually.

It is like the experience of throwing a ball for a dog but the dog missed seeing it leave your hand so you attempt to point to where the ball landed but they only look at your pointed finger and back to you—they do not know there is elsewhere to look for it. They do not understand the human message of finger-pointing as, "Look away from my hand. Over there," and they certainly can not imagine a possibility other than what is right in front of them, what is known and familiar. A hand.

This in turn reminds me of the Zen story of the man coming across the monk one night outside under the light of the streetlamp searching for what he has lost. After a while, the one helping asks, "Where, exactly, did you lose it?" to which the man responds, "Inside my house. But there is no light inside my house; it is dark." He looked to where he could see, where there

was the known we could say, rather than where he could not see or where it was unknown. Of course, he would never find it where he was looking, despite the light being there.

Presenting this idea to my students has been helpful to them:

There is something yet unknown to you. It is a new way of being we could say, which consists of seeing rather than thinking. It is beyond thinking, so any kind of thought will not take you there. Neither will willpower or control of any kind—everything we are so used to employing simply to live. It is, rather, a stripping away, a negating, of what you think you know. It is unlearning.

Krishnamurti (1969) calls it meditation: “That very understanding of the structure of thinking is its own discipline which is meditation. Meditation is to be aware of every thought and of every feeling, never to say it is right or wrong but just to watch it. In that watching you begin to understand the whole movement of thought and feeling” (p.115).

For many of my students, this is confounding: “How could there be something other than thought? And, aren’t those thoughts that you are conveying right now?” In essence, they were continuing to look at the hand rather than where the hand is pointing. I know this experience so well; trying to think my way to insight always left me with a headache. To help them access the experience of what I was saying, I would start with asking them to notice if they have an image of themselves that they carry with them. For many, this was remarkable. Something was pointed out to them that was such a consistent, obvious part of their lived experience but which they had not brought into full awareness. I find that many of them realize they had been aware of this image only peripherally. I often choose the self-image to start with, as I find it is immediately apparent to people. It does not take a lengthy meditation—sitting in observation—to observe it. Once noticed, I ask them to notice whether this is thinking. I also ask them to notice if they

needed to consult outside their own experience to see that it is true, that we carry an image of ourselves. Surprisingly, they notice that this awareness is self-teaching:

Meditation is a state of mind which looks at everything with complete attention, totally, not just parts of it. And no one can teach you how to be attentive. If any system teaches you how to be attentive then you are attentive to the system and that is not attention.

Meditation is one of the greatest arts in life, perhaps the greatest, and one cannot possibly learn it from anybody, that is the beauty of it. (Krishnamurti, 1969, p.116)

In this way, I introduce them to Krishnamurti's invitation to observe (rather than to think) and to observe oneself—one's mind—(rather than external reality). He describes this state of awareness in this way: "The state wherein the mind has stopped is the beginning of reality. When you are all attention to what is happening without thinking, there is understanding. Thought can only think about what is; it can never know" (Smith,1999, pp. 40-41, italics removed). I designed the term *ontological intelligence* (the title of my doctoral dissertation) in an attempt to convey that there is an intelligence that is innate, and that this intelligence is entirely different from that of the intellect.

As an extension of this exercise, I ask my students who it is that they think they are. I invite them to look closely at the image they have of themselves and to write a list, divided into two columns of "good/bad" or "desirable/undesirable" (the mind has already done this sorting; I am just asking them to notice it). My asking them to come into contact with it brings it to full consciousness where they can begin to see that they experience not only themselves but all of life through these images, which are born out of concepts they hold. So, really, I am inviting them into their inner world in the setting of formal education, which is quite radical enough. When we next move into noticing that the mind is producing these thoughts—these concepts—incessantly,

and I suggest to them that the awareness that is noticing thought must be outside of thought, then the course becomes quite subversive of the foundations of academia itself. After all, they have spent years in school where the whole purpose was to develop the conceptual mind.

### **Education as Conditioning of the Mind, and the Limits of the Intellect**

Academia is ordinarily antithetical to this process of transcending the intellect/thought. Education is devoted to the intellect, what Krishnamurti referred to as of secondary importance, the primary importance being understanding self and the whole movement of life for which we need intelligence—something innate to all of us that is non-thinking, non-conceptual. He wrote, “To understand life is to understand ourselves, and that is both the beginning and the end of education” (1953, p.14). Traditional education encourages us to take up a position, on anything and everything, and to find evidence to support our position (something that is always possible). There is an emphasis on “critical thinking.” Once accomplished, we call this “knowing” and “learning.” Yet, by definition, taking a certain intellectual position limits our seeing to a limited part, not the whole. It is the definition of a closed mind.

Academia is oriented in this way for the same reason the human mind is: it is an attempt to nail down life, to understand it conceptually, such that our human lives do not seem so precarious. It seems so logical that if we could define it, we could control it and therefore our own wellbeing. However, if life is in fact alive, which is to say in constant motion, then nailing it down becomes impossible. This does not stop us, though. We believe our lives depend on knowing life intellectually, so we accumulate knowledge. We could say that we learn an immense amount about what it is to ride a bike, without every getting on a bike.

Our tendency in education to implore students to know something—to find answers—is at the expense of encouraging open exploration through the asking of questions. This is the

definition of the open mind. There is a place for knowledge, of course, yet to only acquire knowledge because of the assumption that this is all that is possible for humans and the mind, is extremely problematic. As Krishnamurti (2006) claims, “Knowledge by itself shapes the mind, and so the mind becomes old. The schools and universities are making minds old. They condition conformity, for knowledge has become all-important—not learning but acquiring knowledge” (p.248). Krishnamurti distinguishes here between “learning” and “knowledge” whereas our education systems equate them. “Learning needs an active mind, not a mind that has accumulated knowledge and adds to it through what it calls learning. Learning demands attention; but it is inattention that is encouraged through the accumulation of knowledge and habit” (2006, p.222, italics removed).

I have conducted a class before where we tried together to only ask questions in response to the content we were looking at—to only respond to someone’s question with a question. It was incredibly challenging for everyone. Most people began with, “I think ...” yet this immediately made forming a question impossible. Whenever someone started to make a statement, I asked them to instead reframe it as a question. Some found it incredibly frustrating because they wanted to get across what they knew. Knowing things appears as essential to our sense of self and our sense of wellbeing. We have become identified with what we (think we) know.

I found the exercise incredibly powerful because we could clearly see how almost everything we say is a statement, when in fact, the truth is that we do not know whether or not the statements we are making are true, but feel we need to assert them as though we do. My students could start to experientially see the years of conditioning at work, exhorting them to draw conclusions and to know. It was a tangible way for them to see this aspect of the mind and

what experience it created in them. They could also experiment with what it is like to not know, and to expose that not-knowing openly with their peers. Instead of being in their memory where their knowledge was stored, they could attend to the present moment. Many reported feeling much more relaxed, a greater sense of wellbeing. This would make sense if experiencing our open minds is our true nature. Krishnamurti referred to this state of openness, of observation in the present moment, as attention.

Something I have grown fond of saying to my students is, “It’s the questions that enlighten, not the answers. We are limited by the questions we are not asking.” The mind thinks it has a refuge when it draws the world into black and white (or, duality) yet upon closer examination, the opposite is true: we cannot find peace when we draw false conclusions, and all conclusions are false (in that life is an alive, ongoing, changing thing). It is in the not-knowing where we find our refuge. Of course, I ask my students to test this for themselves. To believe me will not help them, I say. This can really confuse them and even upsets some, who have been conditioned to want answers and to expect them from their professors and teachers. “Tell me what to think!” Is the explicit or implicit request or command from many students. Frustrating the mind by inviting them out of thinking and back to themselves through meditation does not stop them from sensing the truth here. It is helpful that the conceptual mind gets confounded, as there can be a blip of it going offline (the purpose of Zen koans) and this is where they can experience themselves as consciousness without thought. “Watch what is happening inside. Do not think, but watch,” Krishnamurti said (Smith, 1999, p.92, italics removed). He describes the problem of the conditioned mind as the “only problem” and the possibilities of a new mind in this way:

...is it possible to break through this heavy conditioning of centuries....That is our problem. There is no other problem because when the mind is made new it can tackle any problem. That is the only question we have to ask ourselves. But we do not ask. We want to be told. One of the most curious things in the structure of the psyche is that we all want to be told because we are the result of the propaganda of ten thousand years. We want to have our thinking confirmed and corroborated by another, whereas to ask a question is to ask it of yourself. What I say has very little value. You will forget it the moment you shut this book, or you will remember and repeat certain phrases, or you will compare what you have read here with some other book—but you will not face your own life. And that is all that matters... (Krishnamurti, 1969, p.121)

In their role of educating students about life and the world, educators have the chance to include education of the self, to address the inner world of their students to help them towards self-understanding and in that seeing, transform both their own consciousness and the outer world, in that order.

To see is to love and a [person] who loves is in a state of co-operation....In the fullness of co-operation, goodness ... can flower....We have lived so long in the accepted patterns of life that it has become traditional, and freedom, love and co-operation have lost their fundamental meanings. Education is to break down these patterns. In the very breaking down of them is the seeing of the truth of the new (2006, p.217).

### **From Academia to the World**

I teach the above process of moving from the conceptual to the non-conceptual mind to my students to show them the possibility of experiencing life directly without concepts, which is the beginning of unconditioning the mind. They can experientially see the difference between the

two states of consciousness and begin to be in conscious relationship with their mind. From there, we move to their relationship with the world which is mediated by their mind. They can start to see that the world they see is actually viewed from their conditioned mind and they open to consider that what they see is actually concepts, not the world. It is in this way that they can see the need to transform their own consciousness in order to transform the world. If they worked with the world directly, they are not in fact working with the world but with concepts. Hence, the world cannot change as they would wish.

When considering something like the current pandemic and climate change, given the global nature of these issues, I would suggest that the tendency in confronting a topic like this is to immediately think that we cannot do anything about it, that the world and its crises are out of our control. However, Krishnamurti (1969) writes,

When we say we cannot do anything about it, we are accepting disorder in ourselves as inevitable. After all, any movement which is worthwhile, any action which has any deep significance, must begin with each one of us. I must change first; I must see what is the nature and structure of my relationship with the world. (pp. 118-119)

Krishnamurti points us where to look in times of apparent crisis, whether global or personal or both, which is indeed where he suggested we look anyway, in normal times. For Krishnamurti, there was already and always a crisis and that crisis is still with us: the human mind seeing through the veil of its concepts instead of being in direct relationship with what is. This non-perceiving of reality causes all sorts of problems, beginning with fear. It seems that we know (but are just not aware that we know) that the mind is falsely seeing and the tension between this knowing and our false assumptions puts it in constant fear. Most of us experience this as just a normal state of consciousness.

Krishnamurti puts it this way (—for me, his use of the word “energy” is how I use the word “consciousness”): “Energy is always here, but normally it’s involved in pursuing thought, is expended in thinking, so that the real world is secondary and your own responses occupy your attention and use up your energy....” (Smith, 1999, p. 55, italics removed). Being occupied with pursuing thought and by our own fear in response prevents us from actually being in touch with reality where we could actually do something about a problem. “...The intellectual...resist[s] what is.... So there is never any radical change or revolution. This resistance or avoidance is cultivated from childhood... (p.214) ...what makes us act is not an intellectual grasp but seeing the very truth of the matter. Seeing the truth is the only liberating factor, not all the intellectual arguments...” (Krishnamurti, 2006, p.216). It is an extraordinary claim Krishnamurti is making here, that grasping intellectually and seeing the truth are opposed to one another and additionally, the intellect is a problem when it comes to actually taking action in support of actual change.

Making any assumptions about what we think we know is in fact the root of all problems. In addition, the tendency to look outside ourselves to the world and assume that we are seeing what is (i.e., seeing objectively) prevents us from looking instead to the looker who is the thinker. To look to ourselves and our own minds is to take responsibility for what is projected onto “world.” Questioning assumptions points me back to myself to look at my own “nature and structure of my relationship with the world” as Krishnamurti suggests above. As he said, “So, seeing what the world is, with its wars, hatred, strife, confusions, is to see yourself as you are. And to see yourself as you are is to see the world which you have created from what you are... (Krishnamurti, 2006, p.212)

On one hand, I can accept as a premise that there are serious problems in our world which, taken together, could even be called crises, and that acknowledging these problems is the

first step in beginning to address them. In fact, this is my primary goal throughout my professional career: I consider my work as helping people to see what the root cause is of the of violence in our world (i.e., subtle to overt) such that change may take place. (Note: we could say that any kind of violence—including self-violence—describes the crises.)

On the other hand, I have found it necessary to question for myself any claim on reality, using this questioning as a vehicle for seeing what is and what is not, but more to the point, I use it to see myself; specifically, to see my own mind. This, too, is the focus of my work. Indeed, helping my students to the awareness that they have this ability to question any claim and ascertain for themselves what is reality and what is illusion, and to let this inquiry reveal themselves to themselves, is exactly what will end violence in the world. It is this very process of inquiry that enlightens one to one's own mind and it is here where violence begins and where it can end. As Krishnamurti (1971) said:

We are actually what we are—very petty, small, narrow-minded, frightened human beings. And without changing that, any amount of seeking truth, of talking valiantly and in most scholarly ways, or interpreting the innumerable sacred books and start over again, because they, with their interpreters, their teachers, their gurus, have not brought enlightenment to you.... So you might just as well put them all aside and learn from yourself, for therein lies truth, not in the “truth” of another. (pp.97-98)

You must ask questions, not only of the speaker but of yourself, which is far more important. Ask yourself why you believe, why you follow, why you accept authority, why you are corrupt, angry, jealous, brutal, violent. Question that and find out the answer, and you cannot find out the answer by asking another. You see, you have to stand alone, completely alone, which doesn't mean you become isolated. Because you are

alone then you will know what it means to live purely. Therefore you must endlessly ask questions. And the more you ask of yourself, do not try to find an answer but ask and look. Ask and look....( p.109)

We can see in these quotations how the state of the world and the state of education come together. The solution lies in understanding the cause and effect of mind. The way we have come to rely on the mind (i.e., intellect) and its concepts as a way to avoid what is and to make sense of the world have created the world, and the way to transform this is to transform one's consciousness from being identified with thought. "Looking" is not intellectualizing. There is another source of intelligence. Being aware of this is what will transform the world from crisis to peace.

### **Conclusion**

A key aspect of the work that I do with my Bachelor of Education students is to identify the nature of mind—a word I usually use synonymously with intellect. Sometimes I will also employ "the thinking mind" or "conceptual mind" for further clarity. Most people do not know that there is an awareness—an intelligence—outside of thought. That is, they do not realize that they are at the mercy of everything they think and as such create the world of their understanding—their seeing—until they can withdraw some of their consciousness from thought into the non-conceptual mind. We assume that we are the thinker. It does not occur to us to question this or to wonder whether thought can cease.

If we wish to assist in solving problems in the world, we need to first deal with anything we experience as something personal, as a problem/crisis that is internal. I have found in my own life that if I find out why I am experiencing something as a problem—if I can see the cause of which "problem" is an effect—then I am solving the problems and crises of the world.

Krishnamurti (2006) pointed out that as impossible as though it may seem to the mind, the outer world is the inner world, and thus the solutions we seek are to be found in transforming our own mind:

The mind is, after all, the result of the past, and this past is tradition. It lives in this tradition with all its strife, wars and agonies. One must ask if it can be free from its own conditioning.... Without freedom from conditioning, humanity will always remain a prisoner and life will remain a battlefield. (p. 211)

This is good news because we can do something about that—we have the power to work with our own minds. Fix the crises in the world? That is a daunting prospect, and as long as my students and their students have their attention there, they will feel helpless and, indeed, be impotent. Our peace—both internal and external—lies within us.

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