

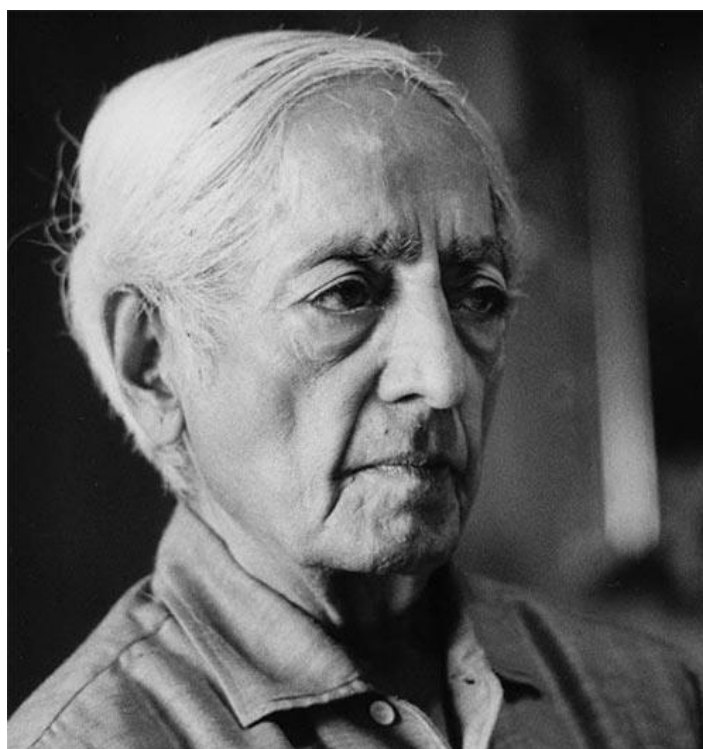
Krishnamurti explained: a critical study

‘One of the greatest thinkers of the age’ (!)
(the Dalai Lama)

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Abstract: The acclaim accorded Jiddu ‘Krishnamurti’ (1895-1986) – as an apparently major figure in our modern understanding of all things spiritual – shows just how shallow western popular culture is when it tries to extend its reach beyond science, materialism and celebrity. Krishnamurti liked to portray himself as a wholly independent thinker, and as someone who encouraged similar independence of thought in others, yet he milked the role of an oriental guru tirelessly, discoursing from on high in an autocratic and commanding manner. At best his vast body of transcribed teachings is diverting nonsense; at worst he’s wasting our time.



Introduction

The acclaim accorded Jiddu ‘Krishnamurti’ (1895-1986) – as an apparently major figure in our modern understanding of all things spiritual – shows just how shallow popular culture is when it tries to extend its reach beyond science, materialism and celebrity. The dismal truth is that western society still has no objective and independent metaphysical ideas of its own, and no ambition to explore topics other than psychoanalysis and popular theories of wellbeing, and this

leaves us vulnerable to all kinds of esoteric vacuity. We can't tell the difference – in terms of spiritual significance - between simple truths and well-meaning hot air, so anyone declaiming confidently on topics other than money or politics is sure to be granted a gilded platform and an eager audience.

The roots of our severely defective approach to metaphysics and spirituality lie deep in western intellectual history, and warrant a detailed study of their own. For our purposes we can only analyse some of the more superficial features of this deficiency in the light of the way we revere figures who, with just the slightest bit of extra reflection, hardly deserve their elevated status. Krishnamurti is one such, and his story makes for an interesting study.

To begin with, Krishnamurti liked to portray himself as a wholly independent thinker, and as someone who encouraged similar independence of thought in others, yet he played the role of an oriental guru tirelessly, discoursing from on high in an autocratic and commanding manner. He didn't wear orange robes, or pretend to be a sannyasin, but he still managed to look strangely unworldly, with an odd, helmet-like comb-over, sepulchral features, and an unsettlingly disconnected manner. He claimed to be on intimate terms with the key problems of everyday life, yet he spent his entire existence insulated from worldly worries in a comfortably entitled way. And his teachings have more to do with a type of 'swami-fied' conceptual poetry and lyrical freewheeling than with comprehensibility and coherence, let alone practicability.

But before we go into all this, we need to make clear at the outset that our primary focus is on how best to assess the ultimate validity of his teachings -- on their own terms -- as impartially and objectively as possible. This means that we are not essentially concerned with any specific aspect of Krishnamurti's biography or private life – insofar as this aspect might reveal hypocrisy or dishonesty or scandalous behaviour -- we are only concerned with identifying his core metaphysical propositions – such as they are -- and analysing them in a straightforward and transparent way. No special spiritual insight or experience is required to follow this line of thought: simply the ability to think clearly and impartially, underpinned by a healthy scepticism.

Perspective: why study Krishnamurti ?

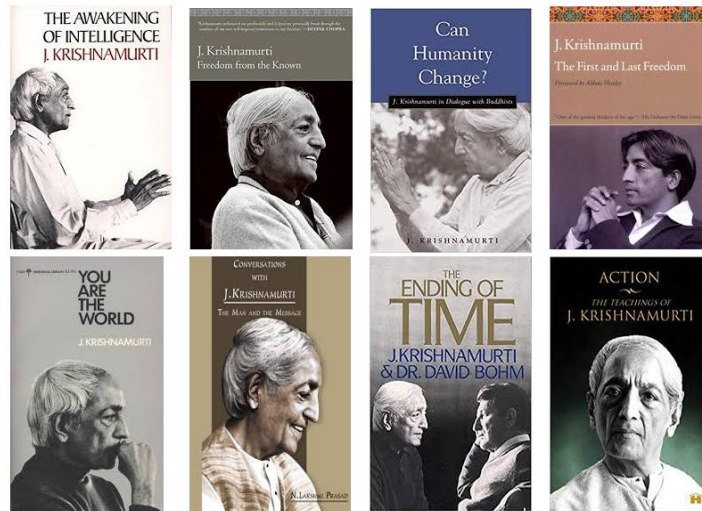
Krishnamurti remains something of an outlier in the pantheon of 20th century Indian missionaries to the west, in that he repeatedly disparaged the idea of devotees blindly following him, yet he did nothing to discourage them gathering reverentially at his feet. He lectured to the faithful in seemingly simple and jargon-free language, apparently avoiding ascents into fantasy, yet anyone able to follow even the simplest argument would surely soon realise that his discourse was entirely declarative and self-validating, and his conclusions either nonsensical or absurd.

Then why bother with him at all ? Because he somehow managed to be taken seriously, often by people who ought to have known better; and despite his obvious shortcomings he was never really called to account, or criticised in any decisive way. It is his mysterious, persisting and unwarranted stature which is both fascinating and instructive.

'Encountering' Krishnamurti

There are a number of different ways in which we can approach the Krishnamurti mystique, but it is illuminating to follow the trail of those who perhaps encounter him for the first time. People often start with the books, and these usually feature a front cover close-up of his head, in profile, looking thoughtful and slightly austere; and this quickly sets him apart from the overt grandiosity of the swamis, who are often keen to emphasise their Hindu exoticism. Krishnamurti's schoolmasterly bearing seems to indicate a more focussed and disciplined thought process than might be found in the writings of someone extolling transcendental

psychedelia. The name 'Krishnamurti' also has a certain cogent ring to it, hinting at oriental wisdom and profundity, while avoiding unseemly showmanship. And the book titles contain words like 'Freedom', 'Culture', 'Education', 'Intelligence' and other topics of general intellectual interest, giving the impression that he might be an academic of sorts working at popularising complex issues, at the same time as managing to synthesize east with west.



A selection of Krishnamurti book covers

And his video lectures continue the pedagogical feel – at least on the surface – with Krishnamurti expounding ideas with what appears to be a jargon-free simplicity. He dresses modestly, and his speech is characteristically slow and deliberate, given to thoughtful pauses and touches of gentle humour. He occasionally gestures with his hands, and often repeats key points for emphasis. His audiences are always wholly attentive and reverential, though the overall atmosphere is informal and relaxed. Dissolute and bohemian types are noticeably absent from any turnout. We could be at a school event for parents and sixth formers; or perhaps at a reading in a literary festival.

What we are identifying here is the specific nature of Krishnamurti’s appeal. He appears to be dispensing eastern holy wisdom to educated and sober western audiences, without the least mystical obfuscation, and without the least unnecessary prerequisites -- whatever they might be, whether incense, or rituals, or yogic practices. In other words, Krishnamurti is the guru to go to if you are attracted to eastern teachings, but perhaps are uncertain about having to wade through local colour. He is supposedly giving us spiritual wisdom in its purest form.

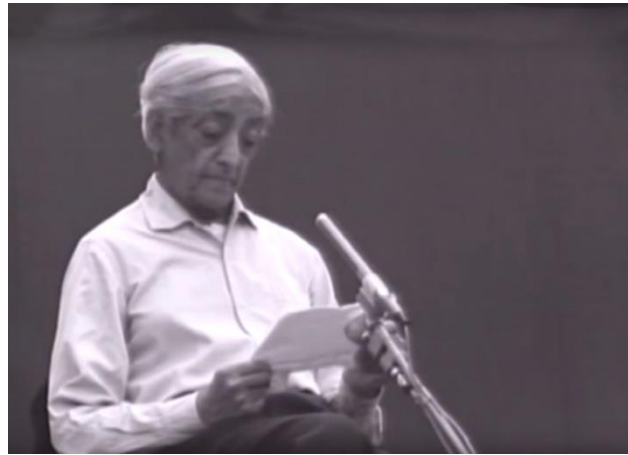
Now of course this says nothing whatsoever about the content and quality of Krishnamurti’s message itself; it is only a contextual first step towards explaining how, in the light of our systematic analysis of what he actually had to say, he was able to maintain a reputation for ‘intelligent plain speaking’.

Example: Krishnamurti on attachment and detachment (video lecture)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDpVebZ88_k

This bite-sized chunk of instruction (about 13 minutes) is typical of both his style and method. It begins with his stately reading out of a question put to him – read out twice - followed by some moments of deliberative silence, followed by his answer.

'The question is: 'Attachment brings about a kind of emotional exchange, a human warmth. This seems a fundamental need. Detachment produces coldness, lack of affection, a break in relationship. It can also deeply hurt others. Something seems to be wrong with this approach. What do you say?'



Krishnamurti starts his answer with the line 'I don't have to say anything!', which draws knowing laughter from the audience. This will be seen as wholly innocent throwaway banter by his devotees, but it indicates the imperiousness and self-importance within which he has situated himself. It is the kind of remark old-style schoolteachers would make, to remind the class of the unbridgeable gulf of authority between master and pupil, and thereby briefly to luxuriate, not in superior knowledge, but in a superior status. He is making it clear to us that he is doing us a favour by his mere presence.

What then follows appears to be a phenomenology of the concept of 'attachment', beginning with an unpacking of the word itself, followed by a kind of illustrative portrait of the concept in action; then followed by an inquiry into the idea of 'detachment', as its polar opposite. As described in these bald terms, Krishnamurti's method might seem perfectly logical and reasonable, as well as helpful to those in the audience who might benefit from witnessing an exercise in elementary conceptual analysis. Krishnamurti seems to be showing us not only how to think, but also how to get to grips with elusive phenomena, through both a careful look at the words we use, and exactly how we use them.

But if you follow his train of thought, and keep track of his line of argument – while quite reasonably expecting a coherent picture to emerge - you soon realise that, almost as soon as he has begun, his account descends into ideational freewheeling and semi-poetic nonsense:

"I am attached to you. The word 'attach' means to cling, to hold – attaché – the feeling that you belong to somebody and that somebody belongs to you, to hold, to cling, to adhere, like a plaster – sorry! – all that is implied in that word. And the questioner says cultivating detachment breeds lack of affection, a coldness, a break in relationship; the cultivation of the opposite. Naturally it will. You understand? If I am attached to you, the audience, and I feel this attachment is dangerous because I know I will be unhappy if I don't meet all of you and talk to all of you, which is my fulfilment, which is called attachment, then seeing the danger of that, depression when I don't meet a large audience, if I meet two

people and, you know, go through all that ugly business, and seeing all that I say I must cultivate detachment. So I must break from you, I must break my relationship if I have a wife or a husband, or a girl or boy, or whatever it is. So I gradually withdraw. And in this process of isolation I hurt others – right? – I hurt my wife or my father, I hurt lots of people, and so on.

Now, is there – please listen – is there an opposite to attachment? If detachment is the opposite of attachment, that detachment is an idea, is a concept, is a conclusion that thought has brought about realising that attachment produces a lot of trouble, a lot of conflict, jealousy, anxiety and so on, so on. So thought says, by Jove, much better be detached. Detachment is a non-fact – right? – whereas attachment is a fact. I don't know if you are following all this."ⁱ

Worse still, his analysis of 'attachment', delivered in those pseudo-scholarly tones - and as seemingly clear-cut and clarifying as any classroom explanation can be - betrays an astonishingly crude and shallow view of what it is to be attached to something, as well as an equally facile portrait of detachment, characterising it as a form of 'non-factual cultivated isolation' brought about in response to the 'conflict, jealousy and anxiety' of attachment. 'Detachment is a non-fact', he tells us, 'whereas attachment is a fact.'

Those sympathetic to this kind of instruction will say that picking on a single isolated example is to take Krishnamurti 'out of context', and to fail to grasp the 'bigger picture'. But the more you read of him, the easier it is to see that his explanations never deviate from a particular format:

'Conflict can only, and must inevitably, exist between the false and the false, not between truth and the false. Isn't that so? There cannot be conflict between what is true and what is false. But there can be conflict and there must be conflict between two false things, between the degrees of falseness, between the opposites.'ⁱⁱ

and

'So is fear perhaps the reason why you have not got the energy of that passion to find out for yourself why this quality of love is missing in you, why there is not this flame in your heart? If you have examined your own mind and heart very closely, you will know why you haven't got it. If you are passionate in your discovery to find why you haven't got it, you will know it is there. Through complete negation alone, which is the highest form of passion, that thing which is love, comes into being. Like humility you cannot cultivate love. Humility comes into being when there is a total ending of conceit - then you will never know what it is to be humble. A man who knows what it is to have humility is a vain man. In the same way when you give your mind and your heart, your nerves, your eyes, your whole being to find out the way of life, to see what actually is and go beyond it, and deny completely, totally, the life you live now - in that very denial of the ugly, the brutal, the other comes into being. And you will never know it either. A man who knows that he is silent, who knows that he loves, does not know what love is or what silence is.'ⁱⁱⁱ

How are we best to understand this kind of lofty gibberish ? Essentially as a form of dictatorial proclamation, in which the guru believes himself to be instructing us from a transcendental realm – ‘channelling’ wisdom, if you like – thereby legitimately bypassing sense and coherence in the process, even while supposedly respecting it. For example, Krishnamurti claims that ‘a man who knows that he is silent, who knows that he loves, does not know what love is or what silence is’, in which he is combining the fatuous chestnut ‘you’re not really happy if you’re aware you’re happy’ with transcendental notions of ‘love’ and ‘silence’ – elemental ‘passions’ beyond ‘knowledge’, as he sees it – to give us the supposedly paradoxical truth ‘you’re not really loving if you know you’re loving’, meaning that any kind of ‘awareness’ of the presence of transcendental ‘love’ negates it, so the only authentic love is a love of which no one is aware – no one including Krishnamurti himself, presumably.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume the validity of Krishnamurti’s transcendental channelling, and take what he has to say at face value. This means that he is able to witness these phenomena in some realm beyond normality, yet has found a way – using our everyday language – to transmit these facts back to us foolish mortals. ‘He’ – transcendental Krishnamurti - is able to ‘see’ – without being aware of that seeing (which would automatically negate that seeing) - that ‘awareness of love’ is not real love, just as ‘awareness of humility’ is not real humility.

The only way that this type of explanation is going to make sense is if we become devotees, abandoning our ability to think clearly and coherently, and simply hoping that complete intellectual self-abnegation will deliver us to some hoped for higher spiritual plane. This means – as it always does in such situations – that the problem with Krishnamurti is not that he talks nonsense, but that we are too unspiritual to see the simple truth of what he is saying.

Of course it is important at this stage to acknowledge without reservation that, when it comes to trying to describe and illustrate elusive psychological and spiritual phenomena, it can often be necessary to employ forms of paradox and contradiction and illogicality, sometimes bordering on what might appear to sound like nonsense; at least to someone who doesn’t understand the precise nature and difficulty of what is being explained. This is because many elements of metaphysical phenomena are characterised by multiple apparently contradictory features at one and the same time, and it is simply not possible to present an accurate portrayal of them without taking this into account. But if and when one does enter these realms, one is categorically obliged to explain, at each and every step of the way, not only why the boundaries of commonsense coherence are being challenged, but also which element of the explanation is causing the difficulty, and exactly why it is doing so. To fail to do so is not only to treat your audience as doltish devotees -- and therefore not possessing any form of intellectual capacity-- but also to treat any instruction as no more than an opportunity for self-aggrandising freewheeling, wherein you grant yourself poetic licence to say whatever you like, no matter how nonsensical, all under the guise of expounding a ‘superior wisdom’.

Studying the transcriptions

Where does this leave us ? Krishnamurti’s vast legacy of transcribed talks -- extending to 17 volumes or more -- are, from the point of view of anyone wanting to explore elemental and objective metaphysical truths, a complete waste of time. That he was able to convince ‘major figures’ – the Dalai Lama, Alan Watts, David Bohm and many others – to respect him as a source of wisdom is astonishing, given the easy availability of his popular titles, and the simplicity of his language. He was not hiding behind difficult concepts and impenetrable specialist jargon: the crudity and absurdity of his thinking is plain for all to see, and you crash into his narrow and blinkered outlook within a few sentences of any one of his very many books.

For example, in 'Krishnamurti on Education' (1974), he begins in the first chapter to say:

'You know, you live in one of the most beautiful valleys I have seen. It has a special atmosphere. Have you noticed, especially in the evenings and early mornings, a quality of silence which permeates, which penetrates the valley? There are around here, I believe, the most ancient hills in the world and man has not spoiled them...'

This can be dismissed as an innocuous enough opening gambit – Krishnamurti being pleasantly polite to his juvenile audience – but in fact he is setting the scene for the kind of rhetorical pivot he liked to deploy at every opportunity:

'and wherever you go, in cities or in other places, man is destroying nature, cutting down trees to build more houses, polluting the air with cars and industry. Man is destroying animals; there are very few tigers left. Man is destroying everything because more and more people are born and they must have more space. Gradually, man is spreading destruction all over the world. ^{iv}

He then goes on to chide the audience for their unwitting complicity in this:

'And when one comes to a valley like this - where there are very few people, where nature is still not spoiled, where there is still silence, quietness, beauty - one is really astonished. Every time one comes here one feels the strangeness of this land, but probably you have become used to it. You do not look at the hills any more, you do not listen to the birds anymore and to the wind among the leaves. So you have gradually become indifferent.'

before going on to discourse, in general terms, about the nature of education:

'Education is not just to pass examinations, take a degree and a job, get married and settle down, but also to be able to listen to the birds, to see the sky, to see the extraordinary beauty of a tree, and the shape of the hills, and to feel with them, to be really, directly in touch with them.'

This is of course boilerplate New Age romanticism – nothing particularly criminal in that – but it's deeply disappointing in the hands of a supposedly influential 'educator'. At base it betrays an extraordinary lack of insight into the dynamics of experience – the unavoidable interplay between positive and negative, in which we have something engaging to struggle against and improve upon – as well as a peculiar ignorance towards the ongoing efforts made by humankind to enhance the quality of life for itself by responding, in a very secular and non-spiritual way, to the challenges of pollution and waste and environmental degradation. Latching on to negativity and portraying the world as 'mad' and 'disintegrating' and all about 'fighting, quarrelling, bullying, tearing at each other' is as facile as the Old Testament idea of sex as the 'root of all evil'; or the idea that peace is good, conflict is bad; or the idea that all cities are bad and only the countryside is good: deploying crude binaries and simplistic negativities of this sort is indicative of very small mindedness as well as a kind of primitive insensitivity to nuance and subtlety.

The essence of the problem with Krishnamurti

To try to put the 'problem with Krishnamurti' into a word or two is not easy – thanks to his slippery and convoluted train of thought -- but it can be done. And it is all about first noticing

– and then coming to see clearly – that, despite spicing his talks with regular rhetorical declarations – ‘isn’t it so?’ ‘isn’t that right?’ -- he never actually makes it clear what he is getting at, or what the point of all his explanations are. He never actually draws the various threads of his multifaceted arguments together, in order to say, ‘this is exactly what I mean; and this is exactly how I can explain it.’ He was forever sidestepping, and ducking and diving, and hopping from one idea to another; ultimately evading capture by alluding to a profound spiritual insight which we are required to accept that he was in possession of.

Perhaps the most damning evidence of Krishnamurti never getting to the point, and never answering the question, and channelling from on high, is a collection titled ‘Questioning Krishnamurti’ (1996) in which various luminaries, including Trungpa Rinpoche, Bernard Levin, David Bohm, Ronald Eyre and Iris Murdoch, put soft questions to the master in the hope of illumination.

A sample:

Krishnamurti is discussing ‘human experience’ with Jonas Salk, an eminent Californian biologist and medical doctor:

K: Human experience—just take human experience. We have had wars for probably ten thousand years or so. And in the old days you killed by arrows or club, two or three or a hundred people at the most. Now you kill by the million.

JS: Much more efficiently.

K: Yes, you are up in the air and you don’t know whom you are killing. It might be your own family, your own friends. So has that experience of thousands of years of war taught man anything about not killing?

JS: Well, it has taught me something. I see no sense in it, and there are growing numbers of people who are becoming conscious of the absurdity of that kind of behaviour.

K: After ten thousand years! You follow me?

JS: I follow you.

K: We must question whether there is any learning at all or just blind wandering. After ten thousand years or so, human beings haven’t learnt a very simple thing: don’t kill somebody, that for God’s sake, you are killing yourself, you are killing your future. And that hasn’t been learnt.

JS: It has been learnt by some but not all of us.

K: Of course there are exceptions. Let’s leave the exceptions, they will always be there, fortunately.

JS: Fortunately, that’s a very important point.

K: But the majority, who vote for war, for presidents, for prime ministers, and all the rest of it, haven’t learnt a thing, they will destroy humanity.

JS: The ultimate destruction has not happened yet. You are quite right, but we need to become aware of that new danger, and something must arise within us now.

K: Sir, I would like to go into this because I am questioning whether experience has taught man anything, except to be more brutal, more selfish, more self-centred, more concerned with himself and his little group, his little family, or whatever. Tribal consciousness, which has become glorified as national consciousness, is destroying us. So if ten thousand years, more or less, has not taught man to stop killing, there is something wrong.

JS: I’d like to offer a suggestion, a way of looking at this question. I’d like to look at it from an evolutionary point of view, and speculate that we are evolving through a period of time, in which the exception to which you referred earlier

may some day become the rule. Now how might this happen? It has to happen or else there will be nothing to speak about after the event.

K: Of course.

JS: We are confronting a crisis now. That crisis is imminent, it gets closer and closer.

K: Yes, sir, that's what we said.

JS: So that we may very well have to enter the arena ourselves in a conscious way. As we are fully conscious, aware of the risk and danger, some effort must be made, some way must be invented to raise the consciousness of the world as a whole, however difficult that may be.

K: I understand all this, sir. I have talked to a great many politicians and their argument is that you and people like you must enter the arena. Now, wait a minute. We always deal with a crisis, not with what has brought about the crisis. When the crisis arises our response is: deal with the crisis, don't bother about the past, don't bother about anything else, just deal with the crisis.

JS: That's wrong.

K: That's what they are all doing.

JS: I understand that. And that's why they need the wisdom of those like yourself, who see the future, can see the 'handwriting on the wall', and will act before the wall begins to crumble.

K: So what I am saying is: shouldn't we inquire into the cause of all this? Nor just say, well, here is a crisis, deal with it.

JS: Yes, I agree with you.

K: That's what the politicians are saying. I mean the cause of all this is obviously the desire to live safely, protected, be secure inwardly. I divide myself as a family, then as a small group of people, and so on and so on.

JS: We are going to discover that we are all one family.

K: Ah!

JS: And our greatest security will come from being concerned about others in our family. It will be of no great advantage to us to have others suffer and be a threat to us as well as to themselves, which is the state of affairs now.

K: But I am pointing out that we haven't learnt through suffering, we haven't learnt from the agony of wars. So what makes us learn, change? What are the factors and the depth of it? Why are human beings, who have lived on it for so long, destroying this poor unfortunate Earth, and destroying each other? What is the cause of all this? Not speculations about the cause, but the actual, deep human cause? Unless we find that we will go on with this for the rest of our days.

JS: That's quite right. So you are asking about the cause.

K: Or causation that has brought man to this present crisis.

JS: As I see it, war is something that men engage in to satisfy the need for survival under circumstances of threat, when there is something to be gained by war. Now when the time comes when nothing is to be gained, and everything is to be lost, we may give a second thought to this.

K: But we have lost, sir. You understand? Every war is a lost war. Why haven't we learnt that? The historians, all the great scholars, have written about it and man has remained tribal, petty, self-centred. So what will make him change? The immediacy of change, not gradually in the future, because time may be the enemy of man. Evolution may be the enemy.

JS: The enemy? Evolution may be the only solution.

K: If man hasn't learnt after all this suffering and is simply perpetuating this thing...

JS: He hasn't evolved sufficiently as yet. The conditions have not, as yet, been propitious for solving the problems that precipitate war.

K: Sir, if we have children, what is their future? War? And how am I, if one is a parent, how is one to see all this? How is one to awaken, to be aware of all that is going on, and of the relationship of our children to what is going on? And if they don't change this thing will go on endlessly.

JS: Therefore a change is imperative. How are we going to bring it about?

K: That's what I am asking. Change is imperative. But if the change depends on evolution, which means time and all the rest of it, we are going to destroy ourselves.

The key propositions from this etherealised waffle are – in no particular order, as the idea of a 'particular order' was never a feature of a Krishnamurti explanation - as follows: 'Every war is a lost war, and evolution is the enemy. Humankind is unable to learn after ten thousand years. The majority vote for war, and the politicians will destroy humanity. Man is tribal, petty, self-centred. We need to find the cause, but causation is the cause. Dealing with a crisis never solves a crisis. Change is imperative. But if the change depends on evolution, which means time and all the rest of it, we are going to destroy ourselves.'

It will again be argued that this passage – and the summary - have been taken out of context, and that if we study what follows and precedes it we will be able to see the validity of Krishnamurti's teaching, and so on, but this is not the case. In fact, none of these 'dialogues' even rises to the level of 'pub talk'; Krishnamurti is – as usual – resting his authority on an allusion to his supreme realisation of a state 'beyond evolutionary and causational time' which offers salvation in a way that 'learning from experience in causational time' cannot; but instead of explaining its principles, and attempting to get the discussion on an equal footing, he is content – again and again -- to continue an exchange in which both parties argue at cross-purposes. It is characteristic of all his discussions that he deliberately holds back from explaining exactly what he means, so that he can maintain the idea – necessary to his peculiar status as some sort of realised being – that he derives his knowledge from a noumenal realm inaccessible to the rest of us.

The 'Krishnamurti' metaphysical proposal, insofar as it can be identified and articulated:

But putting his distinctive misdirection and indeterminacy to one side, it is still possible to identify something like the principles of his theory of spirituality. As he portrayed it, there is a transcendental realm 'beyond knowledge' which affords those who can reconnect with it by negatively suppressing their capacity to think, a total 'freedom' from the woes of human existence, in particular 'fear' and 'conflict'. This freedom is 'ecstatic', as well as being characterised, through a mysterious 'reconciliation', by 'reason' and 'love'. And this realm of transcendental freedom is the realm of Truth, and everything else – especially our intellectual efforts and imaginings to attain it—are false.

How do we reach this transcendental realm? Directly, by negating ourselves at our mental core, and letting the transcendental shine through of its own accord; anything that involves intellectual effort or volitional practice, being essentially 'false', cannot succeed in principle. But how exactly do we negate ourselves at essence, and bypass our hindering 'false self'? You just *do* it; you can't think about it, or you remain the false self you are trying to overcome.

But far and away the most interesting and direct outcome of Krishnamurti's version of 'spiritual realisation' is its utter 'New Age eco-worldliness', in that it reveals itself to be entirely concerned with cherishing nature, and turning us into conflict-free beings full of love and harmony, no longer engaging in wars and aggression. Transcendental knowledge in Krishnamurti's terms is all about the optimal living of life as we know it, in which negativity has

been banished, and in which a kind of luminous everyday intelligence holds sway. There is nothing here along Buddhist or Advaita lines about resolving the essential mystery of existence, or enlightening us as to the essence of knowledge itself; Krishnamurti's supposed spirituality is as curiously mundane as any self-help life coaching proposal could possibly be.

An explanation of his appeal

How then to 'explain' Krishnamurti? How was he able to be taken so seriously? As has been said before, Krishnamurti's overt appeal – at least in the west – has been as the 'anti-guru', and the 'no-nonsense guru', preaching eastern wisdom without the ethnic baggage. He always appeared to be getting to the point, and focussing on essentials, whereas other gurus would spin exoticism and hirsute psychedelia. He carefully avoided references to transcendental states of consciousness, framing his talks instead around simple, everyday concepts, and this in turn gave his lectures a pseudo-scholarly feel. And over time he was able to present himself as a Montessori-type educational innovator, promoting something like 'a genuine search for real knowledge' in contrast to the dead hand of rote learning and exam passing.

And in common with many other successful gurus – the Maharishi was another -- Krishnamurti was ultimately offering a 'better life' in the here and now, through aligning ourselves with his realisations. He was not offering metaphysical insight; he was instead offering a clarity of mind which would solve worldly problems – like conflict, anxiety and attachment - and this is what was important to him. In this way he was appealing directly to the kind of widespread belief westerners have about the value of what they perceive to be 'spirituality': it should necessarily improve the quality of one's day to day life, otherwise it is worthless. The idea that insight into the elements of existence might lead to a fulfilment unrelated to worldly happiness and success is not something most people can relate to.

Now even in the hands of a hard taskmaster like Ajeananda Bharati – himself a German convert to Hinduism, and someone who delighted in high standards of scholarship, and who was not afraid to call out celebrity swamis for their shameless egotism and lack of traditional knowledge – Krishnamurti was given a glowing reference:

'There is the famous, rather wonderful, aging J. Krishnamurti. He began as a theosophist, but he defected, an act of great insight....Krishnamurti has taught in America, Europe, and India...He has written many books, each of which makes sense...Krishnamurti has talked about meditation, sex, the unimportance of God, about yoga and about everything gurus talk about. However, there is a difference: he has never initiated people. He does not tell them to meditate, or not to meditate. He does not issue moral warrants, nor religious pep-talk like the swamis. But he does talk Vedanta – a highly sophisticated, modern, non-scriptural, but authentic kind of Vedanta. He is among the gurus of the world, a no-nonsense man – perhaps the only one....'^v

And so on. It is clear from this that Bharati either knew very little about what Krishnamurti actually said and taught, or he was so seduced by his commanding style that his critical faculties deserted him. And characterising Krishnamurti's peculiarly worldly utopianism as an 'authentic kind of Vedanta' is bewildering: Shankaracharya's doctrine was certainly not all about how to lead a 'good life' in the here and now.

It is surely the whiff of the traditional schoolmaster – in his manner and style – which cemented his reputation for seriousness and profundity, mixing as it does the conservative idea of traditional discipline with the modernity of innovative thinking on matters educational. But sooner or later we need to go beyond the surface imagery and ask what it was that gave

Krishnamurti the confidence to portray himself as spiritually knowledgeable, and exactly what set of ideas informed his thinking and his explanations of things.

And here we encounter Krishnamurti the 'mystic', reaching spiritual conclusions on the basis of a series of experiences that happened to him at various stages in the earlier part of his life. We need to remember that although Krishnamurti went through hardships of a sort in his schooling, and also experienced bereavement and other traumatic events, he lived a relatively sheltered and pampered physical existence, never having to earn a living or face the stresses and conflicts and humiliations involved in everyday striving. This meant his understanding of spirituality was never challenged by anyone, encouraging him in turn to attach greater importance to his own mystical value than might otherwise have been the case.

He was also subject to an unacknowledged cruelty – inflicted on him by the theosophists – of being considered, at a young age, to be a future 'messiah'. He came to renounce this supposed 'honour' and to turn his back on theosophy, declaring 'that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect' ^{vi}, but in many ways the damage to his relationship with normality had already been done. The complete text of his renunciation of divinity and his subsequent dissolution of the 'Order of the Star in the East' -- built up around him -- is worth reading in full, in that it contains not only a statement of the mystical basis of this thinking, but also many examples of the poorly thought-through ideas he liked to think were valid conclusions to his deliberations.

Mystically speaking, Krishnamurti had this to say:

'A belief is purely an individual matter, and you cannot and must not organize it...[one needs to] break away from all limitations, for that alone will give him eternal happiness, will give him the unconditioned realization of the self....Because I am free, unconditioned, whole—not the part, not the relative, but the whole Truth that is eternal—I desire those, who seek to understand me to be free; not to follow me, not to make out of me a cage which will become a religion, a sect. Rather should they be free from all fears—from the fear of religion, from the fear of salvation, from the fear of spirituality, from the fear of love, from the fear of death, from the fear of life itself....I maintain that the only spirituality is the incorruptibility of the self which is eternal, is the harmony between reason and love. This is the absolute, unconditioned Truth which is Life itself. I want therefore to set man free, rejoicing as the bird in the clear sky, unburdened, independent, ecstatic in that freedom.'

This is classic 'swami-speak', mixing 'ecstasy' and 'freedom' and the 'unconditioned realisation of the Self'. And according to Krishnamurti the 'Unconditioned Truth' is 'Life itself', though 'free from all fears' – but, as any sceptic would ask, what kind of life is free of fear? Not ordinary everyday life, obviously, so Krishnamurti must be talking about some kind of transcendental state of existence wholly removed from life, yet allowing the occupant to be present in life alongside the rest of us. And if this being had 'no fear', how would it know what it was like to be merely ordinary, and full of fear? Presumably it would possess a memory of fear – from the bad old days before realisation – and be able to refer to that, but this would present all kinds of difficulties going forward. And more interestingly, how long could you survive in the world if you were wholly 'free from fear'? If you saw an object hurtling towards you, why bother to get out of the way? And so on, indefinitely.

These quibbles might seem very petty when viewed from the perspective of a Krishnamurti devotee, but it's not difficult to see that, for any of this to make sense, we have to

abandon normal scepticism and become believers of the very sort Krishnamurti did not want. The only way to resolve the problem of this transcendental incoherence would have been for Krishnamurti to have attempted to explain – in all the necessary detail -- how all these very many paradoxes and nonsensicalities could coexist, but of course he never bothered to, even over decades and decades of lecturing. Doubtless he wasn't aware of them.

Putting his essential conceptual paradox more brutally, isn't 'fear' an essential element in 'care' ? If I don't fear anything, do I still 'care' about anything ? Yet in this eternal state, according to Krishnamurti, there is a 'harmony between reason and love' – so presumably my 'care' becomes transformed into a fear-free transcendental love, but it's still not clear how this combined 'reason-love' gets to insert itself into our horrible fear-ridden universe without compromising its nature. And in his dissolution of the 'Order of the Star in the East' speech, Krishnamurti emphasised several times that 'my only concern is to set men absolutely, unconditionally free', yet it's not clear why he should be concerned about it – if he's free from everything, what difference does it make whether we're idiots or realised beings ? Why would that even be an important distinction ? And important to whom ?

Krishnamurti – and his many followers and devotees worldwide – like to think that they're getting undiluted insights into all things spiritual, and privileged access to all things related to the good life. In fact all they're getting is nonsensical swami-speak and utopian New Age imaginings. Now it is true that schools have been set up in Krishnamurti's name, and this is a worthy achievement in its own right, – though it's impossible to believe with his entitled unworldliness that he was ever an active administrator – but there's nothing particularly spiritual about setting up schools, even if they're peddling New Age guff about a 'supremely intelligent movement':

'What is the movement that is supremely intelligent? I am using the word "intelligent," not clever, not intuitive, not derived from knowledge, information, experience. What is the movement that understands all these divisions, all these conflicts; and that very understanding creates the movement of intelligence?'

or presenting sentimentalised and unattainable goals:

"How can we help that boy or girl to be free completely and yet highly disciplined, not through fear, not through conformity, not partially free but completely free and yet highly disciplined at the same time?"^{vii}

Summary and conclusions:

What can we learn from all this ? We know from the biographical studies ^{viii} that Krishnamurti was brought up in a warped and extremely unhealthy environment – bordering on a kind of delusional insanity – and this combined with a series of mystical experiences of his own led him into a strange and persisting indeterminacy, in which he rejected the practices and trappings of the swamis while embracing the transcendental channelling which afforded them their authority. He came to think of himself as the master of independent thinking, but it is clear from his utterances that he confused objective thought with dictatorial egotism, and believed that his style of freewheeling actually represented a type of consistent argumentation. And surrounded as he was all his life by eager devotees, he was never challenged on his views or

forced to reconsider anything he said or thought. This is a guarantee of exactly the kind of flatulent self-righteousness that he came to represent.

Yet how was he able to achieve the status of ‘one of the greatest thinkers of the age’^{ix}? For the simple reason that there is no substantial tradition of objective spiritual metaphysics in western culture, and this means that any self-confident bloviator can set themselves up as a spiritual authority, encountering very little by way of meaningful opposition. In addition, Krishnamurti hit upon a winning persona combining schoolmaster with modern educationalist, and this veneer of traditional respectability managed to impress many educated westerners. That most of what he had to say was complete nonsense seemed to pass by unnoticed, the assumption being that any shortcoming in understanding is always the problem of the pupil-disciple, not of the holy man teacher. Western society continues to remain wholly vulnerable to the swamis and the lamas, and is as yet unable to adopt even a minimal objective scepticism towards their florid ramblings. The holies ply their trade unhindered until scandal overtakes them^x and their audiences begin to have second thoughts, but even the idea of judging a teaching in terms of the ‘moral propriety’ or ‘personal attractiveness’ of the teacher is a naïve and unhelpful way to approach serious issues such as spirituality and metaphysics: it is not the teacher that counts, or how you come by their teaching: it is what the teaching itself can reveal to you.

Tellingly, it doesn’t even make sense to ask if there has ever been anyone who, having listened carefully to Krishnamurti, found themselves in possession of the kind of realisation he was talking about. This is because not only did his theory of spiritual realisation not make the least sense from any angle, but also because the whole thing, from start to finish, was entirely self-validating, and wholly solipsistic, and offered no means of objective intellectual scrutiny.

In the end, we can safely say that Krishnamurti has nothing to offer the serious student of independent, objective metaphysics. He may have founded various schools here and there, but setting up schools is not an indication of the presence of metaphysical insight. At best his vast body of writings is diverting nonsense; at worst he’s wasting our time. He believed himself to be a focussed thinker, able to stick to the point; but because his formative years were spent with theosophists and other deranged occultists he was untutored in the exigent demands of intellectual discipline; and as a consequence knew nothing of scepticism, conceptual objectivity, or even basic conversational coherence. His appeal to those who want oriental wisdom without all the robes and sitars is understandable but seriously misplaced, and time and effort would be better spent in elementary metaphysical self-exploration, one step at a time, without Krishnamurti’s misdirection and interference.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Transcript in the comment section below the video.

ⁱⁱ Total Freedom, p.17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Freedom from the Known, p.128-129.

^{iv} Krishnamurti on Education, opening paragraphs of Chapter 1.

^v The Light at the Centre, p.224-225.

^{vi} Full text of his speech at Ommen, Holland, in 1929.

^{vii} Krishnamurti on Education, Chapter 1 to Teachers.

^{viii} See the extensive studies by Mary Lutyens.

^{ix} Supposedly said by the Dalai Lama, and frequently quoted.

^x There are now any number of books, films and newspaper reports cataloguing the inability of the saintly to avoid disgrace.

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