

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### Reflections on Freedom as the *Real* Goal of Education

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**Abstract** *This paper looks at how studying in The School (Krishnamurti Foundation of India), where Krishnamurti's philosophy permeates most informal and formal interactions, has helped to make sense of some of the contradictions that the author experienced in the immediate context of her life in school and after. This is a personal essay that will relate the author's experiences at the school. The author hopes that larger ideas that permeated The School and which guided its teachers and their pedagogy would resonate with others who completed some part of their education at Krishnamurti schools. This essay would be also useful for folks who want to know more about how students at Krishnamurti schools experience learning.*

**Keywords** fear, freedom, dialogue, self-reflexivity

#### **Introduction**

This paper looks at how studying in The School in Chennai (Krishnamurti Foundation of India), where

Krishnamurti's philosophy permeates most informal and formal interactions, has helped to make sense of some of the contradictions vis-a-vis the importance of dialogue and freedom, for example, that I have experienced in the immediate context of my life in school and after. After graduating from The School in 2018, taking a year-long break, and then enrolling for a triple major undergraduate course in history, literature, and philosophy, I have had few opportunities to reflect on what studying at The School meant to me. This is a personal essay that will relate my experiences at the school, and in no way does it imply that all students who studied at these schools experienced the space and what it had in the way I did. Nonetheless, I do hope that larger ideas that permeated The School and guided its teachers' pedagogy resonates with others who completed some part of their education at Krishnamurti schools.

This essay will also hopefully be useful for those who want to know more about how students at Krishnamurti schools experience

learning. I have divided my essay in three parts where I aim to think through Krishnamurti's writings on the relationship between fear and education. The first section will look at the importance of dialogue within places of learning. This will be followed by a section which will discuss what Krishnamurti meant when he said freedom was the real goal of education. Finally, before concluding the essay, I will briefly attempt to think through the problem of freedom in relation to something that Krishnamurti has discussed quite extensively in his writings and talks—the difference between being alone and being lonely.

### **Krishnamurti's Writings on Fear and a Space for Dialogue Within The School**

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of The School and how it equipped me to deal with fear is Krishnamurti's own writings on fear. So much of my experience growing up at The School was the way it was because we were not brought up in an environment that was centered around authority. Even when the teacher's word was final and we had to accept it, we could always discuss why that decision was made. Sometimes, at the end of those discussions, we were still at loggerheads, unwilling to agree with one another. But the fact remained that things could be questioned, and we would be listened to, and that conversations could be had. Consequently, disagreements and

differences were not something that we were afraid of. And this learning—the ability to accommodate differences and disagreements—was a high school experience I think a lot of us found ourselves in quite accidentally. A larger part of how I was able to deal with it was based on how I understood Krishnamurti's writings on education and school as a space for learning.

When I look at the extended world around me today, I agree with Krishnamurti when he says that a lot of our greed and ambition and feelings of isolation come from a place of fear. And fear, in this atmosphere of apprehension in a world that rewards us on the basis of how well we fit into a broken system, is rooted in the lack of intelligence (Krishnamurti, 2018). It means that we have become complacent and have lost the “capacity...to think freely...without a formula” (Krishnamurti, 2018, p. 3). Even if this complacency is not something we want, even when we do not agree or care much for this conformity, we stay put because we do not know how to get out of the rut. But here is where his writings become important: they allow us to find a way out. Through a kind of critical education, one that encourages questioning, one where we are encouraged, as he says, to be in a state of “constant revolt” against conformity, against tradition, against dogmatism, we can discover what is true, and in that process, learn to understand the fear that taints human

existence and interaction (Krishnamurti, 2018).

Increasingly among some alumni it is being felt that The School (and other Krishnamurti schools across the country), while being based on Krishnamurti's philosophy of dialogue and introspection, has not done enough to address contradictions like those of caste within the space and functioning of the school itself. In this light therefore, there has been some discussion recently about how caste figures (or deliberately does not) in the larger functioning of the school space.

The growing anxiety, among my peers that not enough was done to address the questions and problems of caste within the space of the school, is caused by not explicitly working on an anti-caste curriculum. The School, in what is seen as its caste-blindness, is thus inherently an upper-caste (and therefore caste-ist) space. I agree with the critique of The School as one that often fails to explicitly address caste oppressions within society that might be mirrored in the school campus and in the classrooms. In my experience of schooling, it has not held space for difficult conversations on questions of caste within the school, and like most other elite institutions, appears to have a disproportionately large upper caste/class representation. Unlike questions of gender and class, caste was never explicitly brought up and discussed in larger group discussions, either by us (the students), nor by the teachers.

Discussions on caste did take place instead in smaller subject specific classes in the last two years of high school. Yet, while there may be definite steps that the school could initiate to address such critiques, I think there is a significant lack of self-reflexivity in the critiques themselves. And to me it is self-reflexivity that we must inculcate, which, for better or worse, could, if we allow it, be the result of precisely this kind of an education. It is what, I believe, has equipped us to ask difficult questions of both an institution that held space for us to grow, and our own privilege that allowed us for so long to not consider or ask these questions even as we experienced and benefitted from the education in the spaces of our homes and society and schools. Through this kind of education, the school, while failing to engage in a criticism of caste, did enable me to ask questions regarding its manifestations on campus at a later stage.

Such discussions were possible in the space of the school because it facilitated (and continues to facilitate) an education, where dialogue was essential to its pedagogy. I do not mean the kind where every thought someone has that is contrary to what you believe in deserves debate. But rather, one where we rely on calling people in, more than in calling them out. And calling in as I see it is not a free pass for forgiveness; it is instead a more empathetic way of holding people accountable, one where we are

not antagonizing each other, but acknowledging individual mistakes as being a part of larger systemic problems that individuals struggle to contend with the world over. I understand that this is not an easy thing to do, for it further complicates the entire process—do you then forget the individual’s problematic behavior and blame everything on the “system,” or do you hold the individual and the larger system equally accountable? These are questions I have no immediate answers to, but I think the more we work on this way of resolving conflicts the more scope we have at building an empathetic community.

### **Understanding Freedom as the Goal of Education**

Krishnamurti’s philosophy probably will not change the world, because at the end of the day explicit changes in the world do require systemic changes. But a possible place to bring about social change can be the school. How we approach education and what we pass on to those in places of learning today might just be what we need to lay the foundations of a kind, compassionate, and just society. For this, I think that it is imperative that we start by understanding what Krishnamurti means by the goal of education as freedom.

Often, we would have conversations with peers from “mainstream” or “conventional” schools, where we were questioned at length about the assumption of a free

school experience. And promptly we would deny this and insist on proving that we had similar school experiences where we were also disciplined by teachers when we disrupted a class, and the only inconsequential difference was the delay of the examination system and the fact that we did not wear uniforms to school. I cannot write about what conventional school experiences lack because all my schooling happened at a Krishnamurti school, but I do think that consciously or unconsciously, one thing that I learnt to value at The School was the availability of a space that offered a certain freedom to exist and learn without fear.

Over time and in our own ways, we learnt to understand this freedom not as a free pass but as an exercise in reflection. A lot of us still fall prey to the lure of this rat race, from school to college and university and then to a job so that at some point, having made money, we can exist in what we have been conditioned to believe is freedom. It is quite the task to resist this, but for me the fact that school gave me enough to recognize this force and acknowledge and question its presence in the decisions I make is invaluable.

Krishnamurti writes in the chapter “The Problem of Freedom” in the book *Think on These Things*, that

the function of education, then, is to help you from childhood not to imitate anybody, but to be yourself all the time...to be

yourself is very difficult because you think that what you are is ignoble, and that if you could only change what you are into something noble, it would be marvelous... whereas, if you look at what you actually are and try to understand it, then in that very understanding is a transformation. So, freedom lies, not in trying to become something different, nor in doing whatever you happen to feel like doing, nor in following the authority of tradition...but in understanding what you are from moment to moment. And it is possible to understand that...really, when you are in revolt against the whole tradition of trying to become something. That is the only true revolution, leading to extraordinary freedom. To cultivate this freedom is the real function of education (Krishnamurti, 2018, p. 13).

I understand Krishnamurti's ideas about freedom and the purpose of education as something that does not completely reject material reality. Rather, it recognizes the "system" for what it is and insists that we constantly reflect on where our desire to do or not do something is coming from so that we become critically aware of that position we occupy in the "system."

### **Freedom and the Problem of Loneliness and Being Alone**

The cultivation of this freedom, however, is hardly an easy task, especially because we as individuals rely so much on external stimuli in some form or another. When Krishnamurti wrote on the importance of being alone as a manifestation of being truly free, it reads like he foresaw the speed and connectivity of the world we live in today. To be free in such a hyper connected world where we carry around permanent distractions in the form of our smartphones (and so many other gadgets), we would need to be comfortable being alone. To be secure in our aloneness we need to first learn the difference between what it means to be alone and what it means to be lonely. This distinction between being alone and lonely is something I have come back to quite often ever since leaving school.

Krishnamurti (2018, p. 217) explains the feeling of loneliness as the fear of an inexplicable boredom one feels when left to one's own devices, having to deal with the "feeling of being utterly cut off" or even momentarily losing one's purpose. Being alone on the other hand, is a far more deliberate state of being. It is something we choose and even when we do not, it is a state in which we are comfortable in our own company when we find ourselves there. We do not hide from alone-ness in our gadgets, books, people, and

other distractions as we do from loneliness.

Ever since graduating from school, it has been very easy to lose myself in an endless cycle of distractions to escape the feeling that descends each time I have felt cut off from the space and people around me. The space that comes with a relative lack of structure is often too daunting. We fear it because we fear the boredom that comes with having to confront ourselves alone, on a daily basis, and it is here that loneliness lies. There can then never be any freedom as long as we exist without confronting and moving through this loneliness to a state where we understand it; constantly reflecting and moving towards an aloneness—the true state of freedom (Krishnamurti, 2018, p. 217). The function of education as freedom then essentially requires that it take us through “the extraordinary feeling of emptiness which all of us know” and free us from the fear caused by the “ache of loneliness” to live a life in which we can be fully free (Krishnamurti, 2018, p. 217).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have shared my reflections on three themes: fear, freedom, and the difference between loneliness and aloneness to express what I have learnt from my schooling at a Krishnamurti school. Before I conclude, I would like to address a common critique that Krishnamurti schools and students from there have

had to increasingly contend with over the years—that the Krishnamurti philosophy, for all its talk on the importance of reflection, questioning and discussion, *does very little* and says close to nothing about *real world* oppressions.

It is true that Krishnamurti did not speak very much on questions of caste and gender and other similar hegemonic oppressions, but to dismiss his philosophy and the potential of an education that can be unearthed from it would be too inaccurate and simplistic a reading of his work. The merit of his writing as I see and understand it, is lost when we focus on what he does not address. Instead, to make the most of his work would be to read it into the resistances that we are concerned with today, letting it refract through our attempts to deal with the crises of our times instead of looking at how much of it is reflected (or not) in our attempt to deal with them.

In conclusion, therefore, my education at a Krishnamurti school was one that continues to equip me, through both its strengths as well as its shortcomings, to enter the “outside world” with a sense of critical self-reflexivity. Practicing this self-reflexivity day in and day out continues to be a learning process that I still continue to struggle with, one that none of us possibly will ever master. For me it is precisely this challenge and the need to “understand what [we] are from moment to moment” (Krishnamurti, 2018, p. 13).

that forces me to question my own complacency—as well as that of the institution which nudged me in the direction of these skills—in a largely oppressive world order. The atmosphere of dialogue and conversation (along with a space for disagreement) that the school engendered has been crucial to the way I approach larger problems of our society and world today.

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