

J. KRISHNAMURTI
ON CHOICELESS AWARENESS,
CREATIVE EMPTINESS
AND ULTIMATE FREEDOM *

In this age of “free-sex”, *gurus*, Hare-Krishna chanters and transcendental meditation teachers J. Krishnamurti stands almost alone as a *non-guru* of outstanding grandeur. His lecture tours in major centers of the world remind one of the historical Buddha who reversed the Upanishadic tradition of teaching in a forest hermitage to a select few by travelling on foot from village to village in North-Eastern India to carry his message of love, compassion and understanding to the masses regardless of caste, color or sex. But historical comparisons are never complete. Whereas the Buddha used the local dialect, adapted his message to the intellectual level of his audience and made free use of stories and parables, Krishna-

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murti lectures in the English language in his intense analytic style to rapt audiences without any such aid. No wonder the Buddha's appeal and impact historically has been infinitely wider than that of Krishnamurti. And yet, both eschewed dogma, tradition and metaphysical subtleties, and deliberately refused to offer any sugar-coated pills and panaceas for overcoming the pervasive human condition of suffering. They endeavoured to make people "see" and "understand" the human condition in an act of total awareness so as to take them to the very brink of that "creative emptiness", ultimate freedom and radical change which alone is conducive to the attainment of transcendent peace. In other words, the doctrine of Krishnamurti as that of the Buddha is not for the weak and effeminate who need "crutches" of all kinds but for those who have the courage to help themselves by an act of understanding the way things are without being entangled in theories and conceptual puzzles. It is the intention of this paper to analyze, understand and critically evaluate Krishnamurti's concepts of self, action and freedom.

Born in 1895 in South India of poor Brahmin parents, he was adopted by Mrs. Annie Besant when he was barely twelve years of age. He was to be fitted into the role of a world teacher in line with Krishna, Buddha and Christ, and was actually proclaimed to be such a Messiah by Charles Leadbeater of the famous Theosophical Society. An order of the Star of the East was set up with Krishnamurti as its head to propagate the teachings of the Messiah. However, after the death of his brother in 1925 in California, Krishnamurti dissolved the Order of the Star in 1929, underwent a radical psychological change and repudiated all claims to be a Messiah. These early experiences must have left an indelible imprint on Krishnamurti's mind.¹ They partly account for his rejection of all dogma and authority—whether secular or sacred, thus setting him on the path of total independent thinking. Ever since then Krishnamurti has evidenced rare courage in thinking for himself and stimulating his audience to do likewise during the

¹ Mary Lutyens, in her Foreword to *Krishnamurti's Notebook*, points out that Krishnamurti underwent in 1922, at the age of twenty-eight, "a spiritual experience that changed his life and which was followed by years of acute and almost continuous pain in his head and spine." Krishnamurti refers to his pain as "the process" in his *Notebook*.

course of his well-organized and tightly-knit lectures. Without adopting any orator's gimmick he often thinks aloud in a fresh manner leading his hearers step by step to follow him in analyzing topics of basic human concern.²

What is the point of departure for Krishnamurti's message? His analysis starts with the fact of human suffering. Though suffering includes physical pain the concept is much wider than mere organic pain. It is with psychological suffering that Krishnamurti is mainly concerned. At the same time, he is aware of the fact that there is not merely individual suffering but also a collective suffering, chaos and confusion throughout the world. He says,

“There is suffering, political, social, religious; our whole psychological being is confused, and all the leaders, political and religious, have failed us; all the books have lost their significance.”³

One need only see what is happening in the world today to be convinced that there is something radically wrong with it. The violent eruptions in the Middle East, the breakdown of law and order everywhere, rising crime in urban centers all over the world, the fanatical warfare between religious groups and the constant threat of a thermo-nuclear confrontation between the superpowers have brought the world to the very brink of an irreversible disaster. What is the cause of such a malaise? Krishnamurti thinks that the root cause of the malady is the total collapse of moral and spiritual values and an inordinate glorification of sensual and material values. In there a way out? Shall we consult sacred scriptures like the *Bhagavad-Gita* or the Bible for an answer? Shall we go to seek

² Krishnamurti's lectures, talks and question-answer sessions, have been published in the form of a score of books. Harper and Row have brought out quite a few in paperback editions. Though he has condemned repetitive thinking, his basic thoughts appear time and again in all these writings. Yet the approach to the various problems is always fresh and original. Some of the prominent books are: *The First and Last Freedom*, New York, Harper and Row, 1975. (First published by Krishnamurti Foundation of America, Ojai, California, 1954). *The Awakening of Intelligence*, H. and R., 1973. *Explorations Into Insight*, H. and R., 1980. *Truth and Actuality*, H. and R., 1980. *The Impossible Question*, H. and R., 1972. *The Flight of the Eagle*, H. and R., 1972. *Think On These Things*, H. and R., 1970. *Krishnamurti's Notebook*, H. and R., 1976. *The Wholeness of Life*, H. and R., 1981. *Freedom from the Known*, H. and R., 1975.

³ *The First and Last Freedom*, New York, Harper and Row, 1975. pp. 21-22.

out and follow *gurus* or leaders—political or religious? Shall we withdraw from the rough-and-tumble of the world and retire into a hermitage? Shall we pray to the Almighty God and wait for him to save the world? Krishnamurti rejects all these approaches as hopelessly inadequate to meet this tremendous challenge of suffering. He constantly reminds his listeners that he has not read any books—sacred or secular. He has neither read the *Bhagavad-Gita*, nor the Bible, nor the Upanishads. He is ignorant of the work of Plato, Kant, Hegel and Shankar. He disclaims any knowledge of Freud, Adler or Jung. He has no faith in any socio-economic and political ideology such as Communism or Marxism as a cure for the world's ills. As a matter of fact he rejects *all* systems and political institutions as being irrelevant to the solution of the problem of human suffering.

Having rejected all authority of the past and all faith in “futuristic” Utopias and ideologies Krishnamurti puts forward his own solution. He wants us not to accept his message on authority but to try it out in one's own direct experience. Everyone has to “see” the truth for himself through personal experience. Now, his major thesis is that only when we become aware of the truth as it *is* we begin to *understand* it, and in this act of total awareness we become free. Let us understand what he is saying. He puts it thus,

“Understanding comes through being aware of what *is*. To know exactly what *is*, the real, the actual, without condemning or justifying it, is surely the beginning of wisdom.”⁴

Again:

“... if we can look, observe, listen, be aware of what *is*, exactly, then the problem is solved.”⁵

Again:

“To acknowledge, to be aware of what one *is*, is already the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of understanding, which releases you from time.”⁶

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

What Krishnamurti is saying is that we have to understand both outer and inner reality without condemnation, without justification and without identification. This reality is not static. It is in a constant flux. It is changing every moment. A static mind tethered to the past, to accumulated knowledge, to belief, cannot understand the swift movement of this reality. He, therefore, rejects all such “conditioning” as well as habitual modes of perception as inadequate and useless. He has no faith in the so-called knowledge derived from past experience, memory books, *gurus* and leaders. Is there a method or mode of discipline for achieving this state of what he calls “choiceless awareness”? His answer is flatly in the negative. Freedom, spontaneity and creativity are diametrically opposed to forced discipline such as concentration or yoga in all its varieties. Understanding of what *is* requires a keen mind which is in a state of “passive alertness” to observe the constantly changing reality. Such an awareness does not require any time-period. It is not a matter of achievement through time. It cannot be achieved “tomorrow”. Such a choiceless awareness and the consequent radical transformation of the individual can only take place in the immediate present. The revolution is now and not in the distant future. Krishnamurti puts it:

“When that happens, you are completely without a problem, for then the self is not worried about itself; then you are beyond the wave of destruction”

Before examining Krishnamurti’s solution to the pervasive problem of human suffering let us understand what he means by this constantly moving reality. Throughout his lectures he has emphasized that to *be* is to be related—both to nature and to other individuals in society such as one’s wife, child, neighbor, etc. Society cannot be changed unless one understands himself in relation to others. A social system whether of the left or the right cannot change man; only man can transform the system through self-understanding. Therefore, true revolution is not external but is an internal radical transformation brought about by choiceless awareness of what *is*. In this state of pure awareness one exper-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

iences radical freedom and “creative emptiness”. What is this “creative emptiness”? This concept of “creative emptiness” requires a prior understanding of Krishnamurti’s analysis of the psychological self, the “me” with all its beliefs, knowledge, memories, experiences, hopes, frustrations, regrets and anxieties. Krishnamurti rejects any notion of a permanent transcendental entity as *ātman*. He thinks that belief in a permanent self is a result of our persistent quest of and need for *security* born of fear and anxiety. A constantly changing and moving reality frustrates our longing for permanence and for *security*. Hence man indulges in wishful thinking and imagines that behind this changing reality there is something permanent—*ātman*, God or Brahman. He also identifies himself with such a projected permanent entity. He seeks refuge in various kinds of identifications with persons and things of the world. He becomes attached to what is called “worldliness”. But all such attachment to persons and material accumulations cannot give him the psychological security he is seeking because as the Buddha and Krishnamurti have rightly pointed out, nothing lasts forever. Attachment to things and persons as if they are permanent soon leads to frustration, anxiety and consequent suffering. To overcome this suffering one has to “understand” things as they are, become aware of what *is* in an act of immediate, direct perception. Such an act of “choiceless awareness” leads to that state of “transcendence” and ultimate freedom which Krishnamurti designates as “creative emptiness”. This state of emptiness has no idea, memory, belief, hope, ambition, fear, anxiety, etc. as its content. It is pure contentless awareness. Krishnamurti thinks that the ordinary mind conditioned by past memories is unable to experience this state of creative emptiness. Between one thought and another there is that “gap”, that contentless state which alone makes for radical transformation. Therefore this state is not a mere nothingness. It is “creative reality” through which alone one experiences “God”, true freedom and that rare thing called love. This state is called creative because it alone radically transforms the individual, makes for revolutionary change in outlook, and in its tranquillity enables one to experience love which is neither personal nor impersonal. Such a love is timeless, eternal and immeasurable. Only when each individual attains such a state of unagitated tranquillity, wisdom and love, a real revolution will be ushered in, and there

will be a parallel change in the affairs of the world. As Krishnamurti puts it:

Creativeness “is a state in which the self is absent, in which the mind is no longer a focus of our experiences, our ambitions, our pursuits and our desires. Creativeness is not a continuous state, it is new from moment to moment, it is a movement in which there is not the “me” and “mine”, in which the thought is not focused on any particular experience, ambition, achievement, purpose, and motive. It is only when the self is not that there is creativeness—that state of being in which alone there can be reality, the creator of all things.”⁸

In other words, this state of “creative emptiness” is that tranquil state of selflessness, desirelessness and ultimate freedom which the historical Buddha designated as *nirvāna*. However, neither the Buddha nor Krishnamurti deny the satisfaction of physical needs—for food, clothing and shelter. What they are advocating is the overcoming of the ego with its foolish cravings, longings and unending desires. The root cause of bondage, suffering and misery is, for both of them, ignorance of the way things are leading to craving, desirousness, attachment, frustration and suffering. Hence wisdom born of deep understanding alone can lead to ultimate freedom. The practical result of this state of “creative emptiness” would be “love” or “compassion” as the Buddha designated it.

Does Krishnamurti believe in God, afterlife and reincarnation? His approach to these questions is similar in some respects to that of the Buddha. The latter maintained studied silence when confronted with such metaphysical questions because he was grappling with the immediate problem of overcoming human suffering through understanding and moral discipline. Krishnamurti, instead of answering these questions directly, examines why man comes to believe in God, immortality and reincarnation. His answer is that belief in such permanent transcendental realities is a result of our deep-seated psychological need for security and certainty in a world which is constantly changing, and in which nothing is really certain. If man did not have such beliefs he would fall apart and suffer from nervous anxiety. However, Krishnamurti does point out that the state of “creative emptiness” may be called pure love

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

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or blissful God-experience. After all, what matters is direct experience. Concepts like God, *ātman*, Brahman, etc. are symbols which the mind creates in order to articulate that direct experience. He repeatedly emphasizes that to

“discover the new, the eternal, in the present, from moment to moment, one needs an extraordinarily alert mind, a mind that is not seeking a result, a mind that is not becoming.”⁹

Again:

“Truth is *being* from moment to moment and happiness that continues is not happiness. Happiness is that state of being that is timeless.”¹⁰

He points out that reality “has to be found from moment to moment, in the smile, in the tear, under the dead leaf, in the vagrant thoughts, in the fullness of love.”¹¹ He identifies love with truth—a state in which thought with its time-process has completely ceased. And this is, according to him, total transformation and radical revolution. Krishnamurti makes a distinction between thought and intelligence. In a famous conversation between himself and Professor David Bohm of London University he pointed out that thought is mechanical, tied to the past, and belongs to the order of time. But intelligence is of a different order and quality. And yet he acknowledges that matter, thought and intelligence have a common source. They are one energy. Thought subserves the ends of security and survival whereas intelligence is a state of pure contentless awareness—that “creative emptiness” which is ultimate freedom. If Krishnamurti is admitting here that there is One Ultimate Source of all that there is, does not his position come close to that of the Upanishads which declared that source to be Brahman? He actually uses this word in talking about this one primeval source.¹²

Let us raise some critical questions. Has Krishnamurti made a dent in the tough problems facing humanity individually and

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹² *The Awakening of Intelligence*, New York, Harper and Row, 1973, pp. 528.

socially? In a recent lecture at Carnegie Hall in New York City he is reported to have admitted that his impact has been very little. The problems of the world have become more acute economically, socially and politically. And the threat of total extinction through a thermo-nuclear war looms large on the horizon. Consequently the sufferings and the anxieties of individuals have increased. And these are *real* anxieties! What is Krishnamurti's solution? He is against all systems, organizations and ideologies—political, social and economic. He thinks that instead of changing social institutions we should begin with the individual who has to undergo a radical transformation through “choiceless awareness,” “creative emptiness” and “love”. This one-sided emphasis on individual transformation flatly contradicts his own thesis that to *be* is to be related, which means that the individual without a network of social relationships is a pure abstraction. No individual lives in a vacuum, and to suggest that a radical change of perspective through acts of “total” awareness and understanding without a parallel change in social institutions is possible, is romantic moonshine. It is naive, simplistic and Utopian. Can problems of unemployment, overpopulation, destruction of the environment through runaway technology, wars, poverty, squalor and illiteracy—be solved by “lecturing” on the need for individual transformation alone without at the same time coming forward with appropriate changes in socio-economic conditions? If that were possible his lectures for the past half a century would have ushered in the millennium by now. Of course, if everyone was virtuous, “self-understanding”, totally self-aware and in a state of “creative emptiness”, there would be “love” all around, and we would have a society of saints. But this is a big “if”. Such a transcendental aloofness is another form of Utopia. Though Krishnamurti has condemned all forms of Utopian ideologies he has failed to see that his solution of “creative emptiness” is really empty without being creative. No wonder suffering—both individual and collective—continues. He forgets that all self-awareness, total understanding of what *is* and creative freedom assume a minimum of economic freedom and stability without which all such talk is meaningless. To a hungry man the message of “choiceless awareness” and “creative freedom” is stuff and nonsense.

Having realized that his lectures have produced no significant

impact toward the solution of the world's problems, why did he not have a second look at his message and vary his approach to these problems? In other words, why did he remain on the sidelines and not involve himself actively in bringing about desirable social change through practical means? Is it because the real world is too tough and messy for an intellectual like him, where he would have to rub his shoulders and hurt his elbows with the common man? Merely eulogizing the virtues of "passive alertness" makes one a "spectator" and a mere idealistic dreamer. It reminds me of Voltaire, who is reported to have said, "I love the masses but from a distance." Though Krishnamurti hates quoting authority and repeatedly informs his listeners that he does not read books, I cannot help quoting Marx, who said that "philosophers have only interpreted the world; the problem, however, is to change it." Here Krishnamurti stands in stark contrast to Mahatma Gandhi who emphasized not only a radical change in the individual perspective but also a parallel change in socio-economic organization. Mahatma Gandhi realized that if one ignores the latter, then while a few individuals practiced "creative emptiness" and "choiceless awareness", crooks would fill that "gap" and run the world. When saints are busy with "transcendental freedom", sinners take over and govern the affairs of the world. It is the combination of moral integrity and effective organized social action that made possible whatever success Mahatma Gandhi attained in India in toppling the mighty British Empire. Krishnamurti has emphasized only one side of the coin—the transformation of the individual—without any viable program for a parallel change in socio-economic organization.

Secondly, his message of overcoming individual suffering through "choiceless awareness" needs an appraisal. It is true that in order to solve any psychological problem of fear, anger, anxiety, jealousy or lust one has to bring it to the level of awareness. This is a necessary condition, and Krishnamurti has rightly emphasized it. But he has failed to see that it is not a sufficient one. Mere awareness of one's suffering does not automatically lead to its cessation. The Buddha correctly pointed out that besides constant mental alertness one should continuously strive and make efforts to replace the harmful tendencies by those of love, sympathy and compassion through moral action. Krishnamurti has condemned

dependence on past experience, memories and habits outright as obstacles in the attainment of pure awareness and "creative emptiness". Here again, he is not on sound ground. Past-fused experience need not always be a hindrance in the understanding of a present problem. If properly made use of without bias or prejudice it would be of great help not only in understanding the problem but also in suggesting a viable solution. If one did not form the habits of virtuous action one would continue to confront a temptation every time and be in danger of succumbing to it. Therefore, a wholesale condemnation of all habits is indefensible. It is the formation of right habits that gives us the proper amount of freedom in dealing with new problems.

Thirdly, Krishnamurti's concept of "creative emptiness" is vacuous. Mind or self as we understand it is a continuum, and Krishnamurti realizes this. The past with its memories and experiences fuses with the present and together with the projected future they constitute the mind or the empirical self. What Krishnamurti is saying is that such a mind is mechanical, and the self is a construct made possible through the use of symbols. In pure immediate experience of anger, fear, jealousy or lust there is no distinction of "I" the observer (self) and the observed as content. Certainly at the moment of such an experience there is no such dichotomy. This is the state of "having an experience." But a moment later we can become aware of our anger, fear, or lust retroactively. This means that an act of awareness has a content of experience which has passed. Psychologically speaking, awareness of any mental state replaces that state by another one. To be aware of one's anger is not to be angry because the angry state has passed and is recollected in memory a moment later. It is psychologically impossible to be angry and aware of it at the same moment. If this is so then Krishnamurti's concept of pure "choiceless awareness" does not refer to any content such as anger, fear, jealousy, etc. And he says so. That state is the "gap" between two mental contents. This is what he calls "creative emptiness." If it is a pure gap, how does he become aware of it? To be aware of the "gap" is to experience it at the moment of its occurrence and thus make it a content. Then it no longer remains a gap. In other words such a gap or "creative emptiness" is a fiction. W. James long ago pointed out that the feeling of absence is not the same thing as the absence

of feeling. In other words, experience is a *continuum*, and what are called gaps are only vaguely felt bodily experiences such as breathing, which are not focal ones. Krishnamurti confuses this absence of focal conscious, mental states with total “emptiness”. Since such a state releases the hold of conscious states it is experienced as freedom at that moment. Krishnamurti thinks that such moments of “creative emptiness” and freedom can solve our problems of suffering and anxiety. But these are temporary somnolent states from which one is soon rudely awakened by the ruggedness of real problems. For example, say a man has lost his job and undergone nervous anxiety about supporting his family and children, placing food on the table, and paying the bills, etc. If he becomes aware of his anxiety following the advice of Krishnamurti and perchance attains that state of “creative emptiness”, will this solve his problem? Such a state of “emptiness” induced through “choiceless awareness”, if attainable under the circumstances, is only a momentary escape, and the cries of the hungry children, telephone calls from utility companies and the nagging look of his wife soon jolt him out of that “slumber” to face the hard intractable realities of the world. Problems are not swept away by such self-induced states of “creative emptiness”.

Moreover, merely becoming aware of a psychological problem, say of anxiety, is not to understand it. Do I understand my state of anxiety by passively observing it? To understand that state of anxiety I have not only to become aware of it, but analyze its causes and conditions in my past experience as well as present circumstances. Having done that, I have to think of and use appropriate means to remove those causes and conditions. Only then can that anxiety be overcome. If I cannot muster that much psychic energy to deal with anxiety I have to seek the aid of a competent person who can assist me in such a process of self-understanding and of overcoming the state of anxiety. Kirkegaard rightly pointed out that we live forwards but understand backwards. To understand any event—physical or mental, is to know its causal conditions and consequence. Mere awareness is only a first step in that process. After all, what is this “choiceless awareness” without justification, condemnation, and identification? If it means observing a psychic state with objectivity we have no quarrel with it. But it should not be forgotten that objectivity is a

matter of degree and total freedom from bias derived from past experience is an ideal rarely attained. Without the continuity provided by past memories and experiences our mind “hops” from moment to moment in a series of disjointed “nows”. Krishnamurti is so enamoured of such disconnected “nows” as to forget that the continuity provided by our past-fused experience does not always burden the mind with useless stuff. If properly understood, our past experiences can provide the requisite background which can make the present intelligible to us.

To sum it all, Krishnamurti’s emphasis on “choiceless awareness”, “creative emptiness” and “radical freedom” is only a dramatic way of pointing out the value of relaxation and detachment as necessary conditions for creative action. This is the element of truth in his teaching. But to be free is not to be merely in a state of “creative emptiness”. Such a romantic concept of freedom forgets man’s rootedness in the physical, biological and socio-historical infrastructures. Man’s freedom is a real possibility in the sense that he can become reflectively aware of his situation and his past and then summon his resources to overcome his limitations and act in a creative manner. Every such concrete act of choice is the only defensible meaning of freedom in the real world.

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