

**Journal of the  
Krishnamurti Schools**

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Krishnamurti Foundation India

No 22, January 2018

JOURNAL  
OF THE  
KRISHNAMURTI  
SCHOOLS



# JOURNAL OF THE KRISHNAMURTI SCHOOLS

No 22, 2018

## **An Educational Journal**

This is a journal on education brought out annually. It is an anthology of writings by educators, teachers, and thinkers exploring a vision of education in its many dimensions—philosophy, psychology, classroom experience, curriculum, nature and environment, and contemporary issues. It lays a special emphasis on J Krishnamurti's principles of education, and will be of use to teachers, parents, educational administrators, teacher-educators, and anyone interested in education.

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Dear Reader

Kindly share this Journal, after your perusal,  
with a school nearby or a school you know,  
or a teacher who you feel will enjoy this,  
so that it reaches more educators.

Many thanks  
The Editors

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## ATTENTION

Have you ever paid any attention to the ringing of the temple bells? Now, what do you listen to? To the notes, or to the silence between the notes? If there were no silence, would there be notes? And if you listened to the silence, would not the notes be more penetrating, of a different quality? But you see, we rarely pay real attention to anything; and I think it is important to find out what it means to pay attention. When your teacher is explaining a problem in mathematics, or when you are reading history, or when a friend is talking, telling you a story, or when you are near the river and hear the lapping of the water on the bank, you generally pay very little attention; and if we could find out what it means to pay attention, perhaps learning would then have quite a different significance and become much easier.

When your teacher tells you to pay attention in class, what does he mean? He means that you must not look out of the window, that you must withdraw your attention from everything else and concentrate wholly on what you are supposed to be studying. Or, when you are absorbed in a novel, your whole mind is so concentrated on it that for the moment you have lost interest in everything else. That is another form of attention. So, in the ordinary sense, paying attention is a narrowing-down process, is it not?

Now, I think there is a different kind of attention altogether. The attention which is generally advocated, practised or indulged in is a narrowing-down of the mind to a point, which is a process of exclusion. When you make an effort to pay attention, you are really resisting something—the desire to look out of the window, to see who is coming in, and so on. Part of your energy has already gone in resistance. You build a wall around your mind to make it concentrate completely on a particular thing, and you call this the disciplining of the mind to pay attention. You try to exclude from the mind every thought but the one on which you want it to be wholly concentrated. That is what most people mean by paying

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attention. But I think there is a different kind of attention, a state of mind which is not exclusive, which does not shut out anything; and because there is no resistance, the mind is capable of much greater attention. But attention without resistance does not mean the attention of absorption.

The kind of attention which I would like to discuss is entirely different from what we usually mean by attention, and it has immense possibilities because it is not exclusive. When you concentrate on a subject, on a talk, on a conversation, consciously or unconsciously you build a wall of resistance against the intrusion of other thoughts, and so your mind is not wholly there; it is only partially there, however much attention you pay, because part of your mind is resisting any intrusion, any deviation or distraction.

Let us begin the other way round. Do you know what distraction is? You want to pay attention to what you are reading, but your mind is distracted by some noise outside and you look out of the window. When you want to concentrate on something and your mind wanders off, the wandering off is called distraction, then part of your mind resists the so-called distraction, and there is a waste of energy in that resistance. Whereas, if you are aware of every movement of the mind from moment to moment, then there is no such thing as distraction at any time and the energy of the mind is not wasted in resisting something. So it is important to find out what attention really is.

If you listen both to the sound of the bell and to the silence between its strokes, the whole of that listening is attention. Similarly, when someone is speaking, attention is the giving of your mind not only to the words but also to the silence between the words. If you experiment with this you will find that your mind can pay complete attention without distraction and without resistance. When you discipline your mind by saying, "I must not look out of the window, I must not watch the people coming in, I must pay attention even though I want to do something else", it creates a division which is very destructive because it dissipates the energy

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of the mind. But if you listen comprehensively so that there is no division and therefore no form of resistance then you will find that the mind can pay complete attention to anything without effort. Do you see it? Am I making myself clear?

Surely, to discipline the mind to pay attention is to bring about its deterioration—which does not mean that the mind must restlessly wander all over the place like a monkey. But, apart from the attention of absorption, these two states are all we know. Either we try to discipline the mind so tightly that it cannot deviate, or we just let it wander from one thing to another. Now, what I am describing is not a compromise between the two; on the contrary, it has nothing to do with either. It is an entirely different approach; it is to be totally aware so that your mind is all the time attentive without being caught in the process of exclusion.

From Chapter 17, *This Matter of Culture*, J. Krishnamurti

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## Editorial



The Earth, with its bounty of nature, has its own beauty. Human beings, having evolved relatively recently on this planet, have spread across the earth and bring in their wake great conflict and strife, amongst themselves and with nature. In 2017 every continent has been affected by a series of climate and weather disasters. There have been hurricanes and major earthquakes and a devastating fire in North America, severe rains, landslides and famine in Africa, floods in South America, tsunamis in Central America, avalanches and floods in Asia, and in South Asia, especially, floods and monsoon rains.

At a recent Teachers' Conference, where the theme was 'Nature', a comment was made that nature is hardly benign and beautiful, her ways can be insidious. Further, the speaker wondered whether she was now "exacting revenge", presumably, on humans.

How do we reconcile the fact that human beings have emerged from nature, and yet are at such odds with nature? Is it the thought-created 'self' which human beings tend to inhabit and live by, that generates this rift? For the encrusted self, imprisoned by thought and directed by thought, everything is the 'other'. Nature is also the other. This separate self, which thought must protect, is required to act. And by the fact of being alive (often when we're dead too!), we act upon the other. We function in a push-pull world where our experiences become dysfunctional and everlastingly divisive. We often call this choice and individuality. Our conditioning directs us to binary projections: right-wrong, accept-reject, benevolent-destructive. Thus action is always divided, always partial. The inevitable outcome of divided action, no matter how magnanimous and unselfish it might seem to us, is a deviation from what needs to be done. Even when we think there is a vastness to our liberality, there is a boundary we are unable to penetrate. Otherwise why would conflict be such a burning presence in

our daily lives? This response of divisive thought acting on a fragmented view of the world, Krishnamurti suggests, is destructive, because:

...the tree is not just the leaf, the branch, the flower, the fruit, the trunk, or the root, it is a total thing... (it is) the dead leaf, the withered leaf and the green leaf, the leaf that is eaten, the leaf that is ugly, the leaf that is dropping....

To feel the beauty of a tree is to be aware of its wholeness... the extraordinary shape of it, the depth of its shadow, the flutter of its leaves in the wind. Unless we have the feeling of the whole tree, merely looking at a single leaf will mean very little.

When we think of nature as destructive, are we not seeing in it the image of ourselves? What we don't see is that we are reaping the results of our collective human karma.

What is action that is total and complete? When we explore this question simply and directly, as we might do with younger students, certain pointers emerge: *looking, listening, observation, choiceless awareness*—the very essence of 'attention'. We are invited to suspend what we 'know' (including about these words) and open up the senses. We may stay there as long as we can. And every time we gather ourselves, it is a new beginning and not an accumulation. That is the regenerative quality of attentive exploration.

Although it is the work of each individual, does one explore in isolation? Not if you are with others in a school! There is the possibility of learning together in affection, where there is a common challenge, a development in the words of David Bohm, "of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of dialogue."

If we would just 'look' in the beautiful spaces we are privileged to stay in, there is nature with a healing quality. Perhaps because it is not reacting with thought as humans do, thought is not activated in contact with nature. This non-activation of thought brings about a silence, where there might be the possibility of insight, of a seeing and feeling that is whole.

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Many of these core concerns, which inform the intent of the Krishnamurti schools, are reflected in the articles of this issue of the *Journal*. You will find three interweaving themes running through many articles within these pages are the 'quality of attention', 'learning from nature' and varied personal journeys that unfold an 'inward dimension' to life.

The opening article, 'Attention and the Traffic of Thought' explores the need to make attention the foundation of our daily lives, with thought as a necessary tool. The word 'traffic' is suggestive of the ceaseless activity of noise, petrol fumes and pollution, accompanied by inattention, mechanical responses, competition, and road rage. There is a sense of gridlock and congestion. Push the meaning further and you would get smuggling, bootlegging and the black market! For one to step out of this chaos, the quality of attention is always there, available and renewable. It is 'free of time'. Could there be anything more important to be learnt for the young, indeed for all of us?

The great challenge for all our schools is how to have order in the community, without resorting to rules and confining structures, how to relate to each other with care and affection. A group of articles examines the notion of individual freedom, the importance of dialogue, and a deep concern for adults and children in becoming more caring.

'Democracy in School' charts the journey of a small school to create a democratic space, where freedom is not viewed simply as individual choice or personal preference, but where the patterns of thought that hinder inner freedom are examined.

From the same school we have another article with a quirky title, 'Your Kind Attention Please'. The question asked here is why adults and children become uncaring of the communities they live in and whether we need to be 'taught' to be kind. In examining this issue, the author speaks of the struggles of a community in living together mindfully, and the importance of on-going dialogue.

A third article in this section, from another small school, is 'Meeting the Challenge', of bringing Krishnamurti's teachings into the junior school. The author draws on her experience of working with young children to suggest ways in which we may get past habitual responses to children's concerns, questions and curiosity, and approach our interactions with a learning mind.

We have several 'personal journeys' in this issue. This is such a vast canvas, impossible to define. "When setting out on a journey", says Rumi, "do not seek advice from those who have never left home!" And in case we felt the need to post photographs of that journey on Facebook he adds, "And you? When will you begin that long journey into yourself?" Each of

the writers in this section shares in a unique manner a sense of an outer as well as inner journey, which others too could profit by.

In ‘Attention is the Culmination of Intelligence’, the author indicates that she began her journey of discovery in childhood, as she watched Krishnamurti exploring and inquiring with students in the school she grew up in. Emerging as an adult into a world where there is discontent everywhere, she began to understand with Krishnamurti that in a world in crisis everyone is part of the solution. She suggests that “the quality of attention is the vital component of intelligence”, and that it “opens the door to a life-time of learning”, well beyond one’s school years.

In ‘The Flow of Learning and Teaching’ the author looks back ruminatively at a forty-year period of being a teacher. She begins with the question: What sustains and gives a teacher energy? In sharing the stages of her own on-going journey of teaching and learning, she evokes a sense of what it might mean to live vulnerably and creatively, meeting the complexities and contradictions of life, open to uncertainty and the unexpected.

In ‘Learning Empathy’, the writer shares with us her experience of growing up with an evaluation of ‘needs to improve’ in ‘empathy from her sixth grade teacher. There is the troubled feeling of an insensitive self. Later, when she joins her own former school as a young teacher, the meaning of ‘empathy’ begins to unfold in the deepest sense.

‘Reflection, Empathy, and Action’ is the account of the writer’s three “encounters with education”. First as a project coordinator in a school where the children of daily wage earners studied, the second while teaching an undergraduate course where the question of corporal punishment came up for discussion, and finally a discussion on social change and relevant education. She shares the challenges thrown up by each encounter, and the common thread that binds her learning from these.

The final one in this group ‘A Woman, A Horse and A Degraded Stretch of Land’ is about the creation of a farm called Beejom. The writer takes us on an energetic, infectious roller coaster ride—learning about seeds and soil regeneration, sheltering not just cats and dogs but horses, cows and goats, making her own fertilizers, electricity and bio-gas, and growing food in a sustainable manner. It is a journey of breaking barriers along with nature, the greatest teacher, and learning to live responsibly.

Having our schools in natural surroundings is not sufficient if all the time they are locked in structured, academic activities. There has to be an active engagement with nature: working on the land, being alone and quiet, going for frequent and long walks.

‘Nature Education in Marudam’ details students’ interactions in this rural school in Tamil Nadu. Daily observation, exploration of hidden fears, undirected free time with nature, importance of silence in the day, recording and learning from nature, and the role of passionate adults in the learning space helps nurture a culture of respect for nature. A point that comes up is, whether a rural background and fewer possessions have a role to play in the affinity with nature.

‘How Children See’ is an account of several video workshops for Indian children aged between ten and thirteen held over a period of five years. The settings were urban and rural, involving children of different backgrounds; the aim was to understand how children ‘perceived and interpreted their surroundings’ and what that revealed about our society and ourselves. We learn how children performed unfamiliar tasks, how adult approval was sought in spaces where independent thinking was not the norm and how younger children were creative while the older ones careful and inhibited about what they wanted adults to see.

It may not have caught the world’s attention as the discovery of Xanadu (Changdu) made famous by Marco Polo and Coleridge or the nineteenth century discovery of Troy where an epic battle was fought for a woman whose face ‘launched a thousand ships’, or closer geographically the momentous discovery of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. For the history buff, however, is the possibility that the sleepy village Pattanam in Kerala may—just may—turn out to be Muziris, a 2,000 year old trading port, from where black pepper was exported in huge quantities to the Roman world. ‘A Lost Port City and Our Quest’ takes us on a journey of discovery with class 8 students. With their questions and explorations several themes emerge: the plurality and diversity of people living and working together—Jews, Christians and Hindus, a rare archaeological space welcoming children, and the story of the extraordinary ‘black gold’ which left even the mighty Roman empire in debt!

Finally we have a review of Neeraja Raghavan’s book *The Reflective Teacher*. The phrase is placed in the context of how creative individuals think through and resolve problems and its special relevance in the teaching

profession which is a 'multi layered engagement'. The review also brings the focus back on the first article of this *Journal*, as it explores the complementary nature of awareness, attention, observation and reflection,

Krishnamurti talked of the three concerns of education as care for man and environment, a global outlook and a religious mind. Perhaps the first could be done with activities and exposure, the second in the way subjects (history, geography, sociology, economics) are taught and the third, contact with nature, the nurturing of attention, silence and aloneness. Readers will find that, taken together, in one way or the other the articles in this issue touch upon all of these concerns.

**Viju Jaithirtha**

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## Attention and the Traffic of Thought

STEPHEN SMITH



It is a truism barely contestable that explanations, however clear and rational, lead only to clear and rational outcomes. While these are necessary in the field of knowledge, they remain, at best, a superstructure: they supply the scaffolding but not the building. And, most intimately—and most urgently at this time—it is with the building that we are concerned. We have lived too long on the surface of things.

In January of 2017 a group of us met at the Study Centre in The Valley School, Bangalore. It was a representative group—sixteen persons all told—with experienced teachers from the KFI schools and its sister schools. Unlike regular study intensive sessions with frequent exposure to videos and audios of J Krishnamurti, this was a coming together with a difference.

Its focus was attention. The question came up: “What are we doing if, in spite of good intentions, we operate by thought? What will a student leave our schools with if all he/she has learnt is within that field?” There is a case to be made—indeed, a pressing need—for looking afresh at what else may be to hand. This, it was suggested, was attention. It is readily available at all times and places; indeed, in a sense, it is sitting there waiting (Fr. *attendre* = to wait). But it also implies that we *stretch* to it—another etymological function of the word. So, while it is waiting, it makes a demand of its own: we need to look where it is pointing. It is pointing to the present moment, the full stretch and implication of it.

There is a correlation, surely, between thought and action. Meeting someone for the first time, they are apt to ask, “What do you *do*?” In fact, more than anything else, we are defined by what we do. And what we do derives from what we think, as does the socio-cultural matrix in which we were born and to which we have adapted. It is part of the process of narrowing down that is commonly, and correctly, called conditioning. Tacitly or willingly, we have accepted it.

But, what if there were a different way, one that did not treat thought as basic—the building block of our too unsolid life—but rather as a necessary tool, good in its place but in no way the whole? And are we really aware, in the marrow of our bones, how fragmented, divisive and destructive thought is when it tries to take on the work of the whole? There has to be a different way.

Attention is a good place, and a good word, to start with. One can *be* aware, but what if one is not? By contrast, one can *pay* or *give* attention—the word itself has an active component. Am I aware of the shape of the room I am in, of the wind in the trees, the call of a bird? Is it part of my learning, like the pattern of my thoughts? Very modestly, I am beginning to see that thought is just part of my environment: it is not the be-all and end-all of everything. At the same time I am cultivating another faculty, perhaps far more important: observation. I know that thought has made an imprint on my brain, be it sensation, emotion, memory, knowledge or experience—they are all part of the same circuitry—and that it is out of this thought-matrix that I react. I am the prisoner of my own past; moreover, I am not alone: this is the human condition, universally.

Attention—a good thing in itself—naturally and easily leads to observation. In observation I see things clearly—things, perhaps, I had never seen before. For unlike thought, which is time-bound and time-binding, observation in its pure sense is free of time; it is not part of the circuitry. What I see/learn at this moment is for this moment only. It is not to be stored for future reference: it is purely and simply what it is. And the mind that sees it is, for that moment, free; it has begun the task of freeing itself. What greater lesson can the young person learn? Indeed, what greater lesson can any of us learn?

A moment of suspension is required, which is not merely the pause of reflection, necessary as this may be in its own time and place. Rather, it is a moment of arrest: I stop in my own tracks, so to speak; I am *held* above my reactive momentum. Don't ask, for the time being, "Who does the holding?"—which introduces a new element, a new fragment. There is no inevitable agent in the process, and to see this is to gain insight into the process. The ways of thought are ancient and devious, and one of its extra-functional features is to give us information about itself. It actively prevents us from breaking new ground by presenting what is new in terms of the old, thus destroying the freshness of the new. This is why the moment of suspension is the key because our inveterate tendency is to use the

old, the known, as the criterion for assessing the value of the new. At the practical level, it is sensible; at the psychological level, it is lethal.

The traffic of thought is an old traffic: it moves predictably along well-worn ways. Attention, by contrast, is always new. It enters the equation the moment it is given, and it subtly alters the play of things; instead of the causal, the plotted, the predestined, there is an opening up of unlimited potential, the capacity not merely to survive and to manipulate, but to flower in goodness and to awaken intelligence. What we may call the Attention Curriculum is the, as yet, very tentative approach to something of infinite magnitude.

It is also applicable in daily life. By constant attention to our thoughts, feelings and behaviour, we create more and more the climate of change; we create for ourselves the opportunity to delve deeper and wider into ourselves. This is not a self-isolating activity; on the contrary, since consciousness is common, the learning that takes place is not for me alone. I realise my bond, my commonality, with others. And this state of heightened awareness itself helps spread the leaven of a 'working' consciousness. It is the move from closed to open, from static to dynamic.

Thought asks, what next? But attention does not. It's very dwelling on the present, the *what is*, loosens *what is* and, in fact, transforms it. And it is towards a transformed, and transforming, consciousness that Krishnamurti's teachings constantly tend not only because the current crisis demands it, but because it is an organic process in itself. We are like chrysalises born to be butterflies, but solidly encased within the shell of our conditioning. This conditioning—this 'I', this 'me', this ego—is the product of thought down through the ages. It is also the more immediate product that I call myself and that is real-unto-itself, the 'I' that almost everybody lives by. I am called upon to see the falseness of it and, in consequence, go beyond.

Luckily, this is not a projection, nor is it something I have to wait for. No, I can begin it here and now—the dwelling-place of attention and awareness. In so doing, I open the door to the potent mystery of things, something before which the intellect is silent and must be silent for the mystery to be. This is not some far-off, mystical goal: it is woven in with the tissue of daily life.

Can one gather together a group of people whose focus is attention as the basis of learning and who see that the relationship between the two is crucial? For, if attention brings learning, learning too is of the moment: it is

not the accumulation of knowledge, the stored fact. And, by the same token, the fact itself is not the same: it is in and by itself, in the very observation, undergoing a mutation, a change of state. There is no longer a division between the observer and the observed, but the transformation of the one is the transformation of both. What was distant and separate is intimate and whole.

Surely, this relates to integration, a key concept in that succinct masterpiece, *Education and the Significance of Life*. But, if we start with fragmentation, how can we be whole? The whole contains the part—but not the other way round. The part can never become the whole. The whole, however, has room for the part; indeed, the part is integral to it.

“The proof of the pudding” was that we did meet, that “the eating” was sweet and that the topic belonged to all. That it can be reworked and expanded, I have no doubt: it needs only goodwill and a common focus. That it could serve as the basis for a course in teacher education seems equally clear, and that great originality could come from it. The important thing is to have teachers who have seen for themselves the crucial importance of attention—a state of mind or balance of being, into which and through which experience may flow.

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## Meeting the Challenge

### Bringing Krishnamurti's teachings into the junior school

TANUSHREE BORUNDIA



Children observe, learn and ask questions. This way of interacting with the world and with themselves is natural to young minds. The child's mind is capable of observing and an instinctive search for meaning is evident in the questions they ask.

A child whispers with curiosity, "Why do we have quiet time before lunch?" Do we respond to the question with attention and allow for looking at it together? Or do we end the opportunity to look together by responding in certain habitual ways? Some habitual responses are to postpone: "I'll tell you later"; to assume: "It was like this before I came here"; to dismiss: "Does it matter? Let's be quiet now." Children are naturally curious and, so, they ask questions. We can participate in the exploration of the questions in a gentle and spontaneous way.

Krishnaji's teachings are about life—dynamic, fresh and present in every moment. The teachings cannot be converted into specific learning goals and are not a separate subject to be included for an hour every week in the timetable. Further, there is danger in categorising the teachings into sessions of 'critical thinking', 'caring', 'creative thinking'; even 'dialogue' or 'culture class' as they are limited and bound by that hour.

Keeping Krishnamurti's teachings central to our learning space is a demand we must place on ourselves as educators. There is no outward structure or a pre-set timetable that we can depend on, for this enquiry. The constant negation of dependence on these structures, which create an outward sense of order, will allow for the learning space to be touched by a mind that is free of mechanical activities.

We had a visitor the other day, who said "Oh, shut up!" to one of the children in a playful way. Another child, age seven, felt this wasn't 'nice'. She said that she felt that the visitor was being slightly rude. She wanted to share this with the visitor and wanted me to accompany her. Together we went to the visitor:

Child: “Uncle, it felt rude, the way you said ‘shut up’. Can you please not say it again?”

Visitor: “I am so sorry. I didn’t know it was a rule to not say ‘shut up’.”

Child: “It isn’t a rule, uncle; we just speak nicely to each other.”

Seeing with ‘clarity’ and its conversion into a ‘rule’ is a common example of the mechanical activity of the mind. Can one ‘teach’ a way of looking that doesn’t convert seeing into such a conclusion?

How do we, as educators, encourage observation without boundaries, nurture learning without goals and hold questions with responsibility? It is important to become aware of the aspects of ourselves that bring a limitation to the act of observation, without projecting our own goals, desires, conclusions and prejudices.

The constant emphasis on accumulating knowledge and developing skills in most of our learning spaces often takes the place of listening and observing, which is the essence of a learning mind. The preoccupation in the classroom with developing skills can become a fragmentary process. In mathematics, for example, we tend to use knowledge and a skill to solve a specific problem. On the other hand, a mind that is in contact with the teachings could have the ability to ‘see’ a situation with attention, even a mathematical one, while creating the space for subject-related skills to be brought in when needed. When our focus is on the subject knowledge and skills alone, we exclude the ability to see the ‘whole picture’, of which the child’s responses and feelings are also a part. As an educator if I am occupied with imparting knowledge of mathematics or English, and focus on quantifiable skills, I may exclude the child’s living responses to a situation. I need to be aware of this tendency.

What is our understanding of a learning mind? What are the limitations we bring to learning? Are we going into the learning spaces with a mechanical mind? How do we engage with the insights that children may have? Do we meet their learning minds with the authority of the known? Do we overload them with information? Do we distort questions because we feel uncomfortable looking at them ourselves? Are we thus caught in habits that negate learning? We need to ask ourselves these questions. Investigating a question together with the child can happen in subtle ways.

One morning during quiet time, when each one of us was sitting on a tree, I noticed from my perch, a group of children huddled under a tree whispering *loudly*. I noticed my mind travel the habitual path of

conclusions... “Not again! ... How many times do I need to remind them?... Maybe we should just sit indoors, so that I can watch them ... I better not shout at them, but be stern and affectionate when I ask them to go back to sitting quietly.” I got down and started walking towards them with all this noise in my head and wanting ‘quiet time’ to happen. My body showed the frustration of the noise in my mind. As I got closer to them and peered into the centre of the huddle I noticed a tiny bird, dead, its bright yellow feathers, its sharp beak and its tiny fragile body exposed. I noticed the children, all looking with wonder, listening to each other, observing together. My body relaxed as all the noise in my head left me effortlessly and I let go off my goal of going back to quiet time and crouched down to participate in the discovery, together with the children.

Focusing on the goal perhaps conditions a child to conform, while focusing on the learning process opens the mind. As educators our role is to keep the space open for the child to learn and not crowd the mind with information. Learning blossoms when we move from insight to insight, rather than from conclusion to conclusion.

We can enable children to learn by not being rigid with our pre-set learning modules for skill building, but allowing space for the questions and observations that the children have. Skill-building could then happen in the context of listening and observation. In the junior school we can expose the children to a variety of experiences that foster keen observation, interest and total involvement, which nurture and keep the senses alive. To an adult accustomed to equating learning with acquisition of knowledge, it might seem that no learning is happening in these situations. However, once we as educators have opened ourselves up to these questions and are interested in nurturing learning, the learning space opens up.

I will now briefly share some significant aspects that are naturally a part of the junior school that keep Krishnamurti’s teachings alive for the children and educators.

### **Quiet time**

Silence is an important part of the learning space. It is a pause that deepens learning, nurtures observation and provides the opportunity to be with oneself. Quiet time could happen in groups, or alone, supported by structures in school. These could eventually lead to natural pauses in the day.

### **Circle time**

Circle time helps to create a safe environment within the group. We sit in a

circle, raise concerns and questions and discuss it together. Most discussions do not end with a conclusive answer. Together, we have learnt to move away from *complaining* to *addressing concerns* during circle time. Importance is given not only to observing the world around us, but also to the reactions, conclusions, and patterns which may be forming within each of us. This observation helps to free the mind of patterns, so that every perception could be fresh and direct.

### **Nature**

Our schools are located in beautiful natural spaces and lend themselves to observation, silence, wonder and wakefulness. The changing of seasons and the impermanence of life help one to look beyond a fixed pattern. Long walks and working on the land are woven into the learning rhythms. Classroom spaces, thus, become more open, which allows for moving in and out with ease.

### **Free learning space**

Learning happens all the time. An attempt has been made to create order in the learning space that comes from *attention* rather than by conforming to structure. So, instead of starting with a pre-set timetable, the learning space in the junior school has both teachers and resources that help open up learning. There is flexibility to plan together, to work in groups or independently.

### **Contact time**

Every day, some time is dedicated to one-on-one or small group interactions amongst the teachers, parents and the children to engage together with projects and academic skill building.

### **Attention to how we speak**

We, as adults in the space, need to be alert to the words we use, and learn to be simple and precise. We attempt to address the mind of the child rather than the child as a person. One might notice restlessness in a child and when enquiring, ask, “Is the mind occupied with something?” rather than, “Why are you distracted today?”

### **Parent interactions**

The role of parents and the home as a learning space is important. The parents frequently engage in dialogues with the teachings of Krishnamurti, together with the teachers and other parents. They also participate in and support the functional activities of the school. We have seen again and again, how engaging with the questions together has had an impact on the

relationships in school. There has been movement together for the child, educator and the parents.

### **Teacher interactions**

Working together and seeing together demands great commitment from the educators. We need to be constantly open to suggestions, reminders and discussion. This nurturing of 'one mind' negates personal patterns that we might be caught in, and enables us to go beyond the personal. Thus, the question of how to bring Krishnamurti's teachings into our school spaces is really for each one of us to explore.

We might not yet have the facility to open this up or find the words for it. However, in opening ourselves to this challenge, we will be engaged with Krishnamurti's teachings and perhaps our children too will be touched by this.

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# A Woman, A Horse and A Degraded Stretch of Land<sup>1</sup>

## My journey with Beejom farm

APARNA RAJAGOPAL



Living responsibly could mean different things to different people. When I started exploring farming, it brought some very unexpected learnings. Today, growing my own food and living off the grid, has become the core of living responsibly for me. I started my farm with one horse. I do animal rescue and there was a horse that needed a home. I needed land for him. We went looking for land along the Yamuna. There was this degraded piece of land with not a blade of grass on it. The farmer who owned the land had stopped farming on it. He said, “If you want to take this whole stretch, you can”. I stood there and decided right there and then, “I am going to farm”. I took on this piece of land and then I started learning about farming. There was one *jamun* tree and a *charpoi*; and I had an iPad and Google to rely on. To everyone around, I was a curiosity because I was an urban person from Chennai and I was sitting in the heartland of UP, trying to understand farming.

I soon discovered that we had all been farmers at some point. We grew our own food. We grew in season, we regenerated soil, we value-added produce, we pickled, we preserved, we kept it for the next season. We lived a community life where everyone shared seeds and everyone shared produce. Farmers were herbalists, for they knew about indigenous medicine. Farmers were weather forecasters. They could stand and see one gust of wind and say the season was going to change or rains were coming or that there was moisture in the air and we needed to start planting. You didn’t need BBC to tell you that.

In the 1960s, the Green Revolution brought a completely different way of farming. That has affected a huge part of how we live today. With the Green Revolution, we imported seeds and we imported cattle from outside. The whole emphasis shifted from dung to milk. Today, we worship the milk, not the dung. Cows have become factory animals. We have stopped tilling with a bull and a

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a talk given at the Annual Gathering, 2016, of the Krishnamurti Foundation India with the theme ‘Living Responsibly in Today’s World’.

plough. We have mechanized our agriculture. We use diesel with tractors, which means we are leaving a huge carbon footprint. We use hybrid seeds which cannot be reused. We use chemical pesticides and fertilizers, trying to produce greater yields out of land, while continuously destroying our soil.

Today, one of our greatest social responsibilities is to regenerate soil. Out of the soil come our produce, our fibre, our fuel, and our natural resources. Out of the soil comes everything. It regenerates our resources and regenerates water. We build using soil. There is nothing we can do without it. But chemical farming means that you constantly degenerate soil. This is completely against the grain of nature. The world over today, there is soil degradation and ground water pollution. Food is full of pesticides. In Kerala, there is Endosulfan, a pesticide, in all the backwaters. It is causing deformities in children. Punjab, or the 'Land of Five Rivers', and considered to be one of the most fertile regions of India, is barren today. The ground water is poisoned, the rivers are dying.

Further, villages are emptying out, because all the migrant youth that you see in cities have left their villages to look for a brighter future in cities. Lands are being occupied by corporates, by city folk, and being converted into industries and colonies. We are losing our agricultural land. In urban places we remain very disconnected from land, food and nature. Produce in the super markets comes

in shiny plastic bags, and no one cares to know where it comes from. There is no urban-rural connect. Yet everyone talks about environment pollution and degradation. If you ask me what it is to live responsibly today, I would say that it begins with the farm land. It begins with agriculture, with understanding how those three meals get to your table, and what is in those meals.

It was a discovery for me that we are a link in the whole chain, and it is we who are disturbing the entire ecosystem. Tomorrow, if we were to go extinct, the world will actually flourish. If the bee were to go extinct, we too would soon be extinct. The bee is the one that pollinates the forests, and pollinates our crops. There can be no life on land if not for the bee or the insects. We have given ourselves a great sense of importance of being useful to this planet, when we are actually a burden. Once we realize that, we can begin to live with a greater sense of responsibility. We can then begin to ask, why should we protect everything? Why should we protect indigenous species? Why should we protect the tiger? Have we thought about it? Everyday, as we speak, hundreds of species are going extinct. Why should we protect them? That's because every species that exists on this planet is a link in nature. It affects our climate and our seasons, it affects our natural cycles in ways that we don't even know. We have to protect these because the real World Wide Web is this: the life that is under the soil, the life that is among

the plants, and the life that is between animals. The ecosystem under the soil is much more complicated than even the internet. Fungi speak to each other. There is enough evidence to show that trees communicate. Yet, most of us walk by a tree without even a second glance. Today it does not take people two minutes to cut off twenty trees to divert a road.

Madhya Pradesh, which is the land of forests, is where our seed wealth comes from. It has a remarkable diversity of seeds. However, the land that grew millets and legumes that were sustainable for their environment now grows largely soya bean. Maharashtra too has become a cash crop area. They mainly grow cotton; there is hardly any legume. Today, the Indian Government has leased land in Madagascar and Brazil to grow legumes. This made me wonder: Are we short on land? Are we short on people? Or are we short on resources?

In my journey I was inspired by a few people: Masanobu Fukuoka, Bhaskar Save and Subhash Palekar. Masanobu Fukuoka, of 'One Straw Revolution' fame, realized that lesser the intervention, the more the yield. Therefore, he started 'do nothing farming', where you are not an intervener, but you are only a facilitator. Bhaskar Save believes in complete natural farming. His farm in Nagpur uses no chemicals, no fertilizers, not even natural pest repellents. Yet, his yields are much better than the neighbouring farms. Subhash Palekar

propounded a new system of farming called the Zero Budget Natural Farming. I largely follow his method because it is a cow centric farm, which is midway between 'no tilling' and 'tilling'. My farm is called Beejom. I was drawing the *beej* (seed) and realized that in the *beej*, there is the shape of an *Om*. I decided to name my farm 'Beejom' because everything begins with the seed.

The farm is host to many rescued and rehabilitated animals. We have horses and seventy cows from across all of India. There are eleven varieties of indigenous cattle, all of which are endangered. These animals are the ambassadors of the farm. It is they who run it; we are only facilitators. The cow shed is at the heart of it, and the farm is all around it. From the *gobar* (cow dung) and *gau mutra* (cow urine) we make pest repellents and fertilizers. We use indigenous seeds and source our grain seeds from Navdanya.<sup>2</sup> We buy mother seeds from them and try and collect vegetable seeds from people who wish to donate them. We have a bio-gas system, so our kitchen runs on that fuel and so do some lights. We use solar power too and do rainwater harvesting.

Using Palekarji's methods of farming, we grow a lot of millets. A super market today sells nothing but wheat and rice. Before the Green Revolution our staple diet was millets. *Bajra, jowar, ragi, kangni, kodo, sama*: we had hundreds of millet varieties. From being the food of

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<sup>2</sup> Founded by Vandana Shiva, Navdanya protects biodiversity and promotes organic farming. It also runs community seed banks.

the common man, millets are now found in super specialty stores, where only the rich can afford to buy them. Ordinary people can afford only wheat and rice, which are in all grocery stores. One kilo of rice takes 4,000 litres of water to grow. Millets on the other hand are rain fed. They can grow in poor soil, are pest resistant and don't leach the soil. Instead they contribute to it. Millets can also be companion planted with a variety of other crops. Its' grass makes great fodder; the grain makes great food. Why then would we grow something else, something as unsustainable as rice?

These shifts are perhaps due to the control mechanisms of governments and corporations across the world. As people who want to live responsibly, we need to understand how corporations and governments work. It is the government that now tells the farmer what to sow and how to fertilize his soil. It has taken away independent thought and action, the sense of freedom, from the farmer. The farmer who was a provider has now become destitute. He stands in queues for subsidies, which he does not need. He seeks loans, which push him into a debt trap. And then he commits suicide.

With globalization, we have come to a stage where the farmer is hungry and we are in supermarkets buying exotic grains—*kinuwa* from South America, *chia* seeds from some other place in the world, and we want to cook with olive oil. Our food is often contaminated. Farmers are sick when they should have been healthy.

Monsanto is the largest company that sells pesticides and fertilizers. Recently, Bayer bought Monsanto. Bayer is a company that sells medicines for cancer. So, the company that sells fertilizers and the company that makes the cancer drug are one. There is a train that goes from Bhatinda to Bikaner. It is called the Cancer Express. It takes farmers from Bhatinda to be treated in a huge cancer hospital in Bikaner. Can you see how unsustainable our whole life has become?

I don't need the government because I sow my own seeds, grow my own food and make my own fertilizers and pesticides. In addition I generate electricity and make bio-gas. I have what I need and the surplus, I sell. That's how I believe every farmer should be. We grow through a method called *barahnaja*. *Barahnaja* is actually *barah anaj*—growing twelve grains on one field. This is a way of farming that is widely practised in the Uttarakhand hills. After one crop that leaches the soil, we crop-rotate with a legume. The legume has rhizobium in the roots that fixes nitrogen in the soil. That is how crop rotation re-fertilizes the soil in traditional agriculture. But today, monocropping has become the bane of our existence. We take and take from the land and never give back. Therefore, we are continuously destroying land.

We have introduced such traditional systems of agriculture like *barahnaja*, multi-cropping, inter-cropping and companion planting, using traditional seeds. We see weeds and insects as friends. When we

came to this land, it was grey and had no microbial activity in the soil. There was not a single earthworm. We began using liquid cow-dung fertilizer, which when mixed with *dal*, jaggery, *besan* and a bit of forest soil, creates a microclimate. After four days the microbial activity is perfect and ready to be poured onto the land. Within two years, when we had rains during monsoon, we could not stand on the land, since there were so many earthworms. We thus discovered that nature is most forgiving. Even if you give a little, it is happy to regenerate itself.

We also built environmentally friendly cow sheds. Our roofs are made of recycled tetra packs. We have a brick floor which collects the urine in tanks and from this we make pesticides, repellents and fertilizers. We have a project called 'dung home'. We celebrate dung, and make a variety of things with it. Apart from fertilizers and pest repellents, women in the villages make phenol, *dhoop*, *agarbhati*, mosquito coils, and *gobar* pots for nurseries. Nurseries typically use small plastic covers to grow their seedlings. Plastic does not degenerate, whereas with the *gobar* pots, once the plant has outgrown the pot, the pot itself is the manure. We make *gobar* logs as a substitute for wood for bonfires, *havans* and cremations, so that trees need not be cut. There are tonnes of *gobar* in every *goushala* in the country, but nobody uses it because most farmers now use chemical fertilizers.

We have training programmes where we invite farmers. We share knowledge

and our seeds. We teach them for free, give them seeds and encourage them to grow these by natural methods. At the Beejom cooperative, farmers who grow organic produce can also sell it. They don't want to sell it in the local *mandi* because it goes away into the local produce and nobody knows that it is organic. It is also correctly priced, and is not expensive. Our shop challenges the general belief that only the rich can afford to buy organic produce. We don't sell packaged goods. The grains are in sacks, so people bring their own bags or we provide cloth bags so that they can carry the provisions home.

On our farm, the animals are happy. We have beautiful breeds of indigenous healthy cows, and specific breeds of cattle are bred consciously. We have the *Gir*, *Sahival*, *Tharparkar*, *Red Sindhi*, *Kankhrej*, *Rathi*, *Malnad Gidda*, *Hariana*, *Kangayam*, *Vechur* and the *Murrah buffalo*. The *Vechur* is in the Guinness Book as the smallest breed of cow in the world. There are only 300 of them left. The *Malnad Gidda* is from the cattle family of the Western Ghats, and of these only some 2,000 are left. There is, hence, a huge onus on us to preserve our traditional cattle, preserve our traditional seeds and, preserve our traditional practices.

I believe that all of us have to participate in our own little spaces. We cannot just stand and watch all this, and do nothing. We need to understand how this food comes to our plate. We need to realize that a vegan needs one-sixth of an acre, a vegetarian needs three times as

much, and an omnivore, eighteen times as much. We cannot simply allow forests to get cut, and soil to be degraded. We need to understand how we are contributing to the destruction of the planet.

It has been a journey in exploring and breaking down barriers for me. The greatest teacher is nature and therein lies its divinity. I liken the road to individual freedom to the journey of a river. It starts as a trickle in the pristine snow mountains and when allowed to meander and flow as it chooses naturally, it becomes a large, turbulent, grand, river. In its journey, it gathers so much and processes it into rich, fertile silt that it shares generously by throwing it on the banks along the way, facilitating the growth of entire civilizations. When it merges with other rivers, it becomes a confluence of waters. Yet, through all its learning and its journey, and doing and sharing, it never loses its identity. Eventually it reaches the ocean and just before it merges into the ocean forever, it casts the last of the

silt to create fertile deltas and sandbanks and then, it is free. When we build dams, rivers are forced to alter their natural course, causing destruction in their path. Likewise, we have to break our walls and allow ourselves to flow naturally like a river.

We have to observe the world around us; we have to ask ourselves why are we doing what we are doing? There has to be a purpose. We have to ask each time: “Do we really need this? How is this going to impact the world around me?” Maybe then every action of ours would be towards living responsibly. Jane Goodall, who is the greatest chimpanzee expert in the world, said that indigenous people in different parts of the world would sit around before they made a decision and ask themselves, “How does this decision affect our people seven generations from now?” That is what we need to ask ourselves. That would be a perfect recipe to live responsibly.

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# Nature Education at Marudam

V ARUN



## Introduction

First and foremost, nature education at Marudam is a way of life rather than something being learnt as a subject. We are situated in a rural area in Tiruvannamalai, with many of the children's parents' lives directly dependent on nature. Also the school functions under the aegis of 'The Forest Way' trust, which is involved in afforestation, conservation and related activities. Many of the teachers are an integral part of both the school and the trust and as such, have a deep commitment to and passion for nature. The children participate in various activities of the trust: tree planting, cleaning the nearby hill or biodiversity surveys, as the season demands. They participate in all activities from a very young age and get more involved as they grow older. This essay will try and attempt to describe the role of nature in a child's journey in Marudam.

## Starting early

We take in children at three and a half years in the kindergarten (KG) and they stay there until they are around five and a half years. Our KG curriculum is primarily influenced by the Steiner methodology. We don't introduce the alphabet in the written form until they reach six years of age. In the KG, the main focus is relationships: with nature, with each other, with adults. The children go on long nature walks every day where they observe various things like insects, birds, flowers and patterns in the soil. Some children come with an innate affinity for things natural and some come with hidden fears, which may have been passed on from adults in the family. But with gentle engagement with these fears, they slowly drop. As we are in a rural landscape, with agricultural lands and natural thickets, there is much to observe through the various seasons. The children are gently encouraged to not destroy anything and to observe respectfully. Many village children for instance tend to keep snatching at leaves as they walk by, but

soon drop this habit. Every now and then a snake decides to find a home in the KG classroom. Then one of the adults in the campus, many of whom are comfortable handling snakes, will encourage the snake to leave or catch it and release it nearby. They also use the opportunity to explain what type of snake it is, whether it is venomous or not and something about its life. We find twenty two species of snakes around the school and most of us are familiar with all of them. The children's fascination for nature begins early.

### **On the hill**

The whole school goes to the Arunachala hill once a week for half a day. Now that we have grown to around 120 in number, we have split the 'hill day' into two and also divided ourselves into a number of groups, with each group having around ten to fifteen children at most and often, fewer than that.

One of the key aspects of the hill walk is that it is undirected free time with nature. There are seven different trails on the hill and the children select the one they want to go on that particular week. Each trail is slightly different: one has a mountain stream for part of the year; another ends in a fascinating *ficus* tree which everyone can easily climb; a tall sloping rock surface which children love to climb is the highlight for one; yet another involves a long walk across ridges and through a valley. We go for these walks every week through the year. The landscape undergoes lots of changes through the months and everyone observes those changes. We have made a conscious choice not to direct the children towards anything in particular and to let nature act as its own teacher. Of course, accompanying adults are interested in different aspects and that can sometimes have an infectious effect.

We have a silent time in each of these walks. Over the years the children have started asking for longer and longer silent times. In most walks there is usually something interesting that stands out. It could be the sighting of a black eagle gently gliding low over the forest or a bunch of wasps carrying stunned caterpillars to their underground nest chambers. This year, we were going through a severe drought and we could visibly see the distress of the various life forms. It was very difficult to witness it without being affected. Later, when the rains came, the transformation was fascinating and dramatic. Among the many changes we witnessed was the return of butterflies and a few weeks later, caterpillars. Children rejoiced in counting the various species and recording which plants or shrubs they were most attracted to.

The fact that we have been observing the same region over so many years has led to a close understanding of the landscape and the flora and fauna in it. Many on the campus have become nature's chroniclers, noting when different trees bloom, when certain birds migrate, when they breed and so on. On returning from nature outings, many of the children enjoy recording their observations either as drawings or pieces of writing. The observations are shared and usually consolidated on the board. As a whole group, everyone gets to benefit from everyone else's observations.

Teachers and students also watch nature related documentaries which further consolidate our learning from direct observations.

### **Recording nature observations**

A few years ago, we had the opportunity of meeting Mr Prabhakar, who founded the India Biodiversity Portal (IBP). He invited us to participate in it. It is a people-science forum where anyone from the public is encouraged to post their observations of nature on the portal. Through this process, we learn names of unknown species, post interesting observations and end up contributing towards science and helping to maintain a natural history register of the region. This portal has helped our knowledge of the natural world grow, based on our own observations.

The whole journey with insects began with an accidental observation of a death's-head hawkmoth. Children were fascinated by its design and wanted to know what it was. We identified it by posting on IBP. When reading about it, we found that the moth loves feeding on honey. A few days after the reading a student spotted the moth sitting next to a bee hive. This affirmed what we read and everyone was delighted. The same joy was there when we witnessed four species of fruit-piercing moths on our fig and guava trees when they were fruiting.

We are now in the process of gathering photographic evidence of all the life stages of each butterfly and moth. This is leading to many fascinating discoveries. Students recently observed that the lime butterfly has got its name from the caterpillar primarily feeding on the wild lime tree's leaves.

We have compiled a list of birds of this region through our observations (the count currently stands at 180 species). We have done the same with moths, butterflies, frogs, snakes, dragonflies and many other life forms. We have a set of field guides in our library to help with identifying various species. Wherever possible we also have copies in individual classrooms.

Recent small publications in Tamil of various life forms have been very useful and popular.

### **Class projects**

We frequently use the model of projects to study. We select a theme such as insects or farming or pollination, and the children are encouraged to observe as much as they can outdoors. All the learning is brought together and presented through various means such as charts, models and PowerPoint presentations to the rest of the school. In this way, the sharing becomes horizontal across groups and results in much wider holding of knowledge and observations.

### **Respect for nature**

We try and instil respect for nature at all times. We try and create a culture of respect while entering a region and to not bring our loud over-imposing presence. For instance, on one of our trails called the Owl-rock Trail, a pair of eagle owls had nested and we found the parent pair rearing the young ones on a bare rock. We made this trail out-of-bounds for several weeks so that our presence would not distress the birds. While all children were curious to see the young ones, they understood the reason for the ban and respected it. In the same way, we do not disturb any other kind of nest. This included wasp nests in a classroom too.

### **Interaction with passionate adults**

The children have a lot of interactions with adults whose lives are closely associated with nature. These adults are not just the teachers, but also people who work at the farm, the resident artist who is an ardent birder, as well as people involved in tree planting and fire line cutting.

The Forest Way trust employs people from nearby villages who have been working on the hill for many years. They have an intimate understanding of the hill, including the various caves, streams and groves. They are completely at ease in the forest and are very skilled in their work. Our children learn a lot from interacting with them. They have put in a lifetime's worth of work in bringing back the forests. It is impossible to interact with them without being touched by their work and interest.

Many of our children come from agrarian and pastoralist backgrounds. They have an intimate knowledge of the land and crops, and a communion with animals. Besides, as they are in continuous contact with so many adults for whom understanding of nature and interaction with it is an essential life

skill, the necessary skills are quite easily imbibed by them too. For instance, if one is a farmer, there has to be a good understanding of the monsoon, of changes in climate and seasons, in order to decide when to sow and, also, what and how to sow. If mistakes are made this can result in the loss of months of toil and, of course, there is a serious economic impact. In today's era of climate-change, it has become much more complex to decipher the conditions and to make the right decisions, and children have come to understand this.

### **Body work and work culture**

In Marudam there is a physical culture, and we spend a lot of time playing, working and doing body work. The children also spend a lot of time working with their hands and with different materials during craft classes.

There is a general lack of fussiness over children getting dirty and working with their hands. This contributes towards their being less disconnected and more able to engage directly with a landscape or the non-human world. The fact that they are usually not overly 'soft' means that they can be in nature under a wide range of conditions (heat, rain, night-time) and experience those less than comfortable but hugely rewarding aspects.

Our older group of children has become quite a formidable workforce. On many hill days, the group has been working on the land. This year, after the rains, they worked enthusiastically as a team to create rain water harvesting structures, plant trees on the hill, work on the vegetable garden, etc. Some of our children have even become adept at ploughing with a pair of bullocks. So, work has become another means through which they connect with the overall intention of the place.

### **School trips**

Our school trips are mainly to sister projects like the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary (GBS), at Wayanad, or Solitude in Auroville, where we have friends involved in nature conservation or organic farming. Also, our children and adults alike love going to these places.

We have been making trips to GBS ever since Marudam started, and many of our children have been there five times over the last five years. They are completely at home there and are quite capable of taking care of themselves by cooking or setting up camp. Of course, we have the wonderful guidance of Lorenzo Castellari and Suprabha Seshan when we are there. Repeated visits have helped children develop a relationship with the place,

and the learning has been immense. A large part of the time is spent being alone and observing, drawing, recording and reflecting for over several hours each day, and that is what the children want. In addition they also do community work to help the projects at GBS.

This comfort with and love for the place, however, didn't happen overnight. A new landscape like GBS, with its thick forests, leaches, snakes and elephants, can cause fear in children, particularly on their first visit and when they are young. There is, of course, also excitement. Over repeated visits all these emotions find their rightful place and there is a level of comfort which develops and creates the scope for deep learning.

### **Looking within and the larger questions of life**

It is impossible to engage with nature without engaging with humanity's place in nature, our impact and what our rightful role should be. These big questions constantly come up for students and are engaged with seriously. Sometimes, they lead to large group discussions. Similarly, to understand what it means to be human, one has to look within, to our own inclinations, assumptions, actions and insecurities. Many of our interactions with nature throw up these questions, often intensely and uncomfortably, and the older group in our school engages with these issues in depth.

Many of us would like to think of ourselves as stewards of nature, but are we playing that role or are we mere exploiters? For instance, this question came up intensely during the recent long drought here, when many forms of life were suffering from lack of resources, but we humans continued to live in almost the same way. Yes, many of us were emotionally and psychologically affected, but the way we lived and used resources was not particularly affected. Situations like this throw up a lot more questions than answers.

### **We have not arrived**

All this is learning in progress as is everything else in Marudam. By no means are we suggesting that all children in Marudam are equally touched or that we don't have negative experiences. A few years ago, two bird nests were destroyed by children, who, fascinated by the eggs, secretly took them away. We spoke to the whole group and explained the importance of respecting all life forms. Also, the fact that many of our children are from a rural background helps, as they are much more in tune with nature. However, children do show a tendency to be preoccupied, not to observe or be silent, or caught up in their own group dynamics while on a trip. These attitudes are addressed through conversations in circle times and as when they are observed. Children also

tend to have different interests, and while the atmosphere is conducive to all these learnings, children will learn what they want to.

Nature is an integral part of our life. We are a part of nature. But in the way our modern lives have been shaped, our engagement with nature has become highly fragmented. We have lost the true understanding of our own dependence on nature. Many of us even now have notions of conquering nature, controlling it and shaping it. These ideas have of course resulted in the mess that we are in today.

Is it possible to turn things around? Is it possible to create small but strong counter-currents which function with a different sensibility? Is it possible to dare to hope for our children?

Ecologically speaking, we are living through a mass extinction period: a human created mass extinction. There is no turning around for those species threatened with extinction or those already extinct. It is not clear how much time we have on this planet without a rapid escalation of the crisis we are already in. Some say twenty years, some say till the end of the century. However long that may be, do we simply continue to live life on the same terms as our peers and recent generations past or do we try and gain a new understanding? Can we look at tribal communities and their relationship with nature to understand a different way of life? Can we facilitate the possibility for our children to look at life differently from the way we did and to try and live in a less exploitative, more life-affirming manner?

These are some of the questions which currently guide us and help us stay on the creative edge of learning from nature.

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## Democracy in School

KEERTHI MUKUNDA



We are often asked at our school, Centre for Learning (CFL), how our children will survive in the ‘outside world’, how they will adjust to systems once they graduate, and how they will fare in society—the ‘real’ society. Essentially, these are questions about how the children will fit into the society that exists somewhere else. We are brought up to believe school is a place which prepares one for a society out there. But our intuitive response at CFL to such a query is to explain how we *are* a society already, a microcosm, an experimental space for children and adults to practice participative community life, learn to live together, listen to one another, work to keep the place going, and work to keep a culture fresh and alive.

We would venture to say that this microcosm is a ‘democratic’ space. Recently a few of us teachers attended a conference on democracy and it made us re-look at the culture we are trying to create here in CFL. Of course ‘democracy’ is a complex word, carrying with it equally complex concepts like justice, liberty, fraternity and equality. Perhaps, we are one attempt to create such a space where voices *are* heard, freedom of thought and feeling *is* exercised, and a ground of common humanity is being created. Easily said and written, but the road is a long and arduous one! So here is a description of one school’s journey in creating a democratic space.

Once we use the word democratic, questions that follow could be: Do the children then have choice in creating the curriculum? Do they have choice in coming to the learning when they are ready? Do they feel free to learn what they would like to, and pursue their interests? Our responses to these questions of individual freedom are often intricate or involved. Children experience a sense of freedom on campus, but it does not literally manifest into individual choice on a day-to-day basis or individual preference with regard to a timetable or activity. Isn’t freedom something greater than these day-to-day choices? We *would* examine the notion of freedom, but by taking

it to another level in dialogues with each other and the children, and here is possibly how:

*Freedom usually implies expression of one's personal choice or right. While free expression of thoughts and ideas has its place, we feel there also needs to be a turning inward to ask: What does freedom mean when my own mind creates divisions and hierarchies in any context—class, caste, ability, appearance? What are the patterns of thought in children's own minds that make for mechanical, non-free action and behaviour? Can there be freedom from the continuous labelling of others and ourselves?*

We also work to create a space where every voice is heard and we are all participating in the community. Again, echoes of democracy come to mind, where consensus and dialogue are paramount. In school, it is captured through the act of sitting down together and talking, whether one-on-one, in a small group, a whole class, or the whole school of 75 children and 15 adults. We have regular weekly time set aside, but unstructured dialogue is also the medium through which we communicate and relate at many points.

There is also continuing dialogue about community norms with the senior-most classes in school. These can be around food, music played on campus, lack of sensitivity to dirty dishes, habits of gossiping, water as a scarce resource, hostel sleep times, snacking in rooms, and so on! Looking at the list, it covers both—habits of groups, as well as the needs of a community space such as ours. The norms over the years have formed from real situations and feelings, rather than personal idiosyncrasies. The children and we arrive at these through dialogue and understanding, rather than receiving them as 'rules'. For instance, it makes *sense* to clean school spaces ourselves before the day begins, or wash our own plates and cups after a meal. It goes from these kinds of concrete examples all the way to leaving our living spaces open and trusting each other not to take things, steal or damage others' items. Despite these norms 'making sense', the human condition and temptation expose themselves in the community time and time again, and we go back to dialogue and understanding. It is a work in progress, really. But without practicing and living these processes on a small scale such as ours, how will children learn to be responsible, intelligent, and thoughtful members of society at large?

Therefore, when we engage in conversation, the focus is on being a responsible citizen of *this* community. Dialogues help us understand why

norms have formed, why it feels difficult for us to follow them, how it cannot be a majority-wins situation, why living in a group implies adjustment and looking critically at one's own needs and preferences, how living together cannot be based on a collection of each one's freedoms and needs, but rather, a seeing of what is safe or caring or efficient or sensible for all ages and all members, and *then* coming to the norm. We encourage proposals for change from children when these can enhance the campus in some way. However, children also know that many times norms stay the same even after long discussion and that the point of the dialogue is something else. Living together with this spirit of dialogue helps us see that the implications of our own choice-based actions have repercussions, socially and emotionally.

Often we discover that at the base of our daily work is a feeling of being divided from the other, and an urge to belong. The urge to belong is not just confined to the wider society with its nations and religions, for example. Its roots are right here, right now in each of us, and we would like to recognize it in each of us.

We had been talking about looks, colour of skin, cinema and gender stereotypes for a couple of weeks with a group of eleven year olds. In one of the discussions, when asked who they feel different from, a child blurted out, "Basically, someone who is not ME"! Perhaps she had meant, "Someone who is not *like* me". But her simple statement said it all! We feel separated from the 'other' all the way from countries, states, communities, religious sects, and neighbourhoods, to the person sitting next to me. Feeling separate is the crucial point. We would like children and ourselves to observe this feeling of being separate while immersed in the ups and downs of daily school and community life. Or perhaps recognize the 'hyper-need' to find similarities of culture, looks, experience and background, which overshadows the humanness of being together, no matter who you are or where you are from. How can we respond with compassion to each other rather than sizing each other up based on a mental list? It occurs to us that this is what fraternity implies.

I return to the question I began with, but now shifting from, "How will the children fit?" to "How will the children respond?" A response to the world should emerge from sensitivity, care and a feeling of responsibility. Typically one acts from a centre or an identity, which drives the action. An example would be feelings of guilt. But our identities and 'reasons' for action

can narrow our responses and somehow make us feel we have 'done our bit'. So, in our microcosm, here's what we are trying to nurture—a global mind with a feeling for the world as a whole; a questioning mind that can look at all of one's stereotypes, not only some; a sense of wonder, connection and humility; a mind which does not seek security in identities; and finally, a sense of democracy that resides within each one of us.

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# Awakening to the Absurd

GOPAL KRISHNAMURTHY



*It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a sick society.\**

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh warns of the expansive and devastating impacts of climate change amidst the parching and narrowing of human narratives and imagination. In ‘Rainforest Etiquette in a World Gone Mad’, Suprabha Seshan challenges the boundaries between the human and more than human worlds, and the artificial niceties of inhabiting an increasingly virtual and abstract reality. In *Unheard Voices*, Liz Otterbein attends to the humanity of those deemed mentally unwell and the normalization of institutional insanity in maintaining control over them. In *Thought as a System*, David Bohm elucidates the incoherence of thought itself, its penchant for fragmentation, its motivational necessity and unyielding impetus, its tendency to confuse the map with the territory and its capacity for creation and deception in creating problems and pretending that they are ‘out there’ needing to be solved by more thinking.

In *Culture Against Man*, Jules Henry suggests that *homo sapiens* must perpetuate and conform to culture itself or risk relegation as abnormal, delinquent, deviant or criminal. With close anthropological observations of teaching-learning situations, Henry excavates school (progressive or conventional) as an institution for drilling children (and teachers) in absurd cultural orientations: professing cooperation and creativity while promoting self-interest and conformity to the values and norms of society. Moreover, such absurdity is itself circular, in that we are educated and in turn educate with more of the same, that is, patience, adjustment and adaptation to absurdity.

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\* Source unknown, but attributed to J. Krishnamurti

When education equips us (children and adults) to “be well-adjusted to a sick society”, to fit into an incoherent and increasingly impractical society, then education itself commits us to absurdity; for in educating and being educated, we are complicit in the transmission and reproduction of social norms and mental dispositions that maintain the status quo. It behoves us then to dislodge our commonsensical notions, disrupt well-worn courses of action and disavow the easy temptation to meet our collective or individual predicaments on their own terms. If the world is made and sustained by the absurdities and inertia of the human condition and conditioning, perpetuated in the small moments of our actions and interactions, can it also be *undone* in the small moments?

I thought to explore these concerns with students in a course called ‘Awakening to the Absurd’. In the context of this discussion, *awakening* is meant as a movement of perception and action in unravelling two intertwining strands of absurdity: First, the insanity in the seemingly normal and reasonable, and second, the sanity in the seemingly aberrant. The class was based on attention, not taking anything for granted, questioning and turning situations on their head.

If an alien without any teeth were to visit you, would you be able to teach it the significance of brushing teeth? If an alien without the same language, assumptions and beliefs were to visit school, could you draw its attention to the processes of school and learning? In the world as it is today, is it possible to be in it but not of it? We observed and enacted ordinary and extraordinary situations involving actions, movements, sounds and speech, without adding meaning and interpretation to them. The session involved eight students (ages fourteen to sixteen), a teacher apprentice and myself. We met for three and a half hours in the morning, twice a week for two months.

To dislodge our sense of identity, the course began by our assigning each other with absurd names that were anagrams of our usual names. The class was a space where we had to call each other by our absurd name and respond to this name. If, by force of habit, one of us resorted to normality (in calling another by our familiar names), we were relegated to a ‘bench of shame’ where we had to hold our head in our hands, lament about the consequences of our actions and demonstrate remorse so as to be permitted by the others to re-enter the class.

Rather than treating a slouching posture or a person rocking a chair as evidence of disinterest, we used these as opportunities to mirror the different

postures and attitudes that we brought to the situation. For example, in one activity everybody watched an unfolding enactment from a slouching or tilted posture, from under a chair, upside down, bent over and from a varied or unusual angle. On occasion we just looked at each others' faces without any words and at another time we had to do so while laughing hysterically. The intention was to pay close attention to elements of space, position, gesture, posture, stance, movement, words, names, time, sequence and narratives without taking anything for granted and looking at these from changing angles of regard.

We looked at social and psychological situations and turned them on their head. Occasionally the inspiration for some activities was drawn from the 'Theatre of the Absurd' (the work of playwrights such as Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett). However, this was not decided beforehand but introduced in response to something that emerged from our interactions, in an experiential manner rather than rationally through words and explanations.

At an end of term school meeting, students shared some of their work from the previous session. Each student had closely observed a very normal, everyday experience in their lives—such as brushing one's teeth, making a cup of tea, walking along the corridor, falling asleep—and any feelings associated with these activities. They each wrote a narrative (page or paragraph) describing their observations devoid of any interpretations and evaluations. The intention was for the author to devise a precise set of instructions for another person to enact.

The next step was to take these short narratives and render them in an absurd light (remove teeth from brushing, enact something in a reverse/jumbled sequence, introduce a strange object or vary the proximity of interactions). The challenge was also for an audience to simply observe ordinary or extraordinary actions without imposing or adding their own meaning and interpretations. Some of us experienced this as funny, others as challenging in getting ourselves out of our comfort zones and others as downright absurd. The audience found it strangely intriguing and engaging even if they were unable to explain why or what it was all about.

For many students, this was the first time in acting. My intention was for all of us to discover skill and technique that are not mechanical but embedded in a movement of teaching and learning unfolding from attention. As for me, after several years of 'teaching' I wished to, as a challenge, enter the class

without any plan (even to put aside prior experience, skill and knowledge), and to improvise every class from scratch in attending to the situation at-hand and what we all brought to the moments of our interactions.

What impact did the course have on the students and on me? Retrospective reflections from the students regarding the course included phrases such as ‘uncomfortable’, ‘strange’, ‘easy’, ‘natural’, “It is possible to be interested in a story without understanding it” and “life might be lived without adding any meaning”. On recollection, my own reflection was that the course involved “the disorientation and disruption of commonsensical meaning-making and action, and diving beneath the wreckage of the settled, the known and the possible”.

But did the course change anything fundamentally? Did it fulfil its aims? Which activities worked and which activities did not work? Such questions align themselves with our quest for ‘learning outcomes’ and recast the educational and educative encounter into the separations of means and ends; process and content; intentions, activities and results; and educational relations (student, teacher and subject matter). Indeed the subject matter of the course itself was its unfolding impact on all of us and our on-going relationship and interaction with ourselves, each other, and the world.

Within this space and during this time called ‘class’, I came upon four principles of teaching that served as an invocation for me, that I wish to share:

Principle 1: Pay close attention to everything and don’t take anything for granted.

Principle 2: Unless you are just conveying information, do not meet or answer a question or problem on its own terms (that is, enquiry is not merely moving from question to answer to question but questioning the questions themselves).

Principle 3: Disavow and disrupt any distinctions between teaching and learning (both student-centred and teacher-centred notions of education perpetuate spurious dichotomies).

Principle 4: Don’t be absurd; there are no principles of/for teaching!

When we teach safely, we proceed in such a way that our first-order beliefs about excellence, motivation, ability, intelligence, teaching, learning, academics, school, practicality and the so-called ‘real world’ are never fully called into doubt. We begin with an assumption that we know a great many

first-order things to be true, and hence, teaching essentially involves a search for principles and practices that will justify and apply these beliefs. When we teach with risk, on the other hand, we expose these first-order beliefs to the perils of inquiry. What does it look like to uncover a curriculum? Why learn maths or art? When and where is learning visible? What occasions or smothers teaching? What is a 'class'? Everything is up for grabs. I have adapted this approach from James Rachel's *Moral Philosophy as a Subversive Activity* and contextualized it for teaching.

Can we learn to reframe and turn our challenges on their heads and teach to disrupt the known, the familiar, the settled and taken for granted? Awakening to the absurd can be extended to teaching any subject when it involves disrupting and reframing the curriculum (visible or hidden) in terms other than the learning that it aims to attain. Teachers may wish to explore this challenge for themselves but for instance:

(i) We might start with any question and find different and wildly diverse routes to work out its answer[s]; or (ii) we might start with a question and its answer[s] and find different ways to make sense of and traverse between the answer[s] and the question; or (iii) we might even start with an answer that spawns questions across vastly diverse areas of subject matter. For example, starting even with an uncontextualized, specific and seemingly banal answer such as "42" what are all the questions we can generate? (The questions could range from the chemical properties of molybdenum, the periodic table, rainbows and refraction, Catalan numbers, Pythagorean mathematics, *Alice in Wonderland*, the layout and development of New York City, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (Anne Frank), World War II, the Kabbalah and even the Meaning of Life in *The Hitch Hiker's guide to the Galaxy!*), or (iv) we might even generate unanswerable and impossible questions? This could occasion not merely the undoing of the proverbial 'textbook answer' but the undoing of the textbook itself.

Neil Postman speaks of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. William and Rick Ayers challenge us towards *Teaching the Taboo*. Their suggestion is not just about seeking more questions rather than answers but about exploring the world around and within us in unusual, irreverent and impossible ways. With schools, teaching and curricula so resolutely focused on demonstrating or reproducing what we already know (the tried and tested), today, more than ever, 'not knowing' is a crucial point of departure for learning and teaching. It calls for disrupting the known, the status quo, the taken for granted and

the familiar, and for reframing our questions and terms of engagement with the world. This, then, is an invitation for teaching with care, attention and a touch of madness in an insane world.

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## Your Kind Attention Please

RUPA SURESH



*Caring is really a part of that profound thing called love. It begins with the care of little things...*

*To have real affection for people, one must not only look and listen, but also care. Do you care for anyone? Do you care for your parents? Do your parents care for you? Caring means looking after others, being kind, seeing to it that they are not treated cruelly. And you cannot really care for anyone if you do not see, if you do not observe...*

J Krishnamurti

When teachers met during our annual curriculum meeting, I shared an observation of children which we then discussed and looked at carefully: Do teachers feel that children are becoming increasingly uncaring towards the spaces they inhabit, the things they have around them and the people? Has meanness become the habitual mode of relating with others? Do we feel that care and kindness can be taught? Should there be a more concerted effort in helping children learn to care?

While an account of varied examples of insensitive behaviour ensued, there were many voices of caution too: Are we simply complaining? Are we making a complex problem out of what seems to be lack of etiquette? Have we been inattentive to certain behaviours that need addressing? Since a large part of our observations was related to junior and middle school children, we decided that our discussion would focus on this age group. There was a general consensus—what we are seeing needs mindful engagement on the part of adults. It is of little relevance at this point to establish whether or not the problem is a result of lack of etiquette!

We examined our current approach in working with junior and middle school children. When we notice behaviour that concerns us, we address this through conversations with the particular child. Weekly dialogue sessions with a group of children offers another opportunity for engagement; however, whether or not specific themes like care and kindness feature in the dialogue classes is left to the discretion of the adult guiding these sessions. Through these conversations, we hope to draw the children's attention to what is happening within them and the impact it has on others. In other words, we would like children to be reflective. Now we were asking: Should this engagement in helping children learn to care be ongoing and independent of specific incidents? It is without doubt important to address specific incidents of insensitivity, but can there also be a continual engagement with this aspect of living together? What would this engagement look like?

Before we explore what we can do to help children 'learn' in this realm, let's take a look at some patterns of teacher response that come in the way. Do teachers find it difficult to say, "Hey, that is rude" or "That is disrespectful"? What are some reasons for such a hesitation? Are we confused and unsure about what behaviour needs confrontation? Does fear of being disliked by children stop us from challenging them? Are there differences amongst teachers in their expectations of children's behaviour?

It seems to me that we can, without attributing ill-intention to children's rude behaviour, certainly register our displeasure and make a clear demand for politeness. This approach may look a bit odd at first, especially if we feel children will come to an understanding on their own, as these themes do emerge in our dialogue classes. It is true that children actively engage in dialogue with adults and are not just passive listeners, and may even make connections between these conversations and what they see in themselves. But this should not take away the need for simple, straightforward demands/instructions/requests to be made by the adult!

Mindfulness is a state of alertness. You are alert to what is happening in and around you. As adults, we hope children will slowly come to understand this. We may not know how to teach it, or if it can be taught at all! What we *can* do is provide reminders, point out, and draw their attention to psychological movements that may otherwise pass them by. Here, it is important to ask: Do we need to build our skill in talking with children succinctly? It is easy to lose children in lengthy explanations—many a time we are not only unaware of our long winded sentences, we feel we have been

lucid and crisp in our sharing! Verbose responses from adults hamper even the faintest likelihood of reflection in children.

There have been many struggles as we help children learn to live cooperatively in a community—things are stolen, others' belongings are meddled with, children are excluded by peers; there are dirty toilets, plates and bowls left unwashed. These are not unusual, we will all agree, when people live together; they nevertheless need to be addressed and strong responses from adults become inevitable. Last year, we decided to dedicate an hour and a half each week for middle school children to care for spaces. The intention was to help children take responsibility for a particular space and attend to it regularly—to keep it clean, tidy and aesthetically appealing. At the end of the year, we heard from children about what they had learnt from this engagement. Many said that it made them, “a little more alert” to things around them; otherwise they would be mostly engrossed in something with their friends. It is true that children are preoccupied; we often hear or see them sharing with one another their excitement over shows, movies, songs, video games and so on. This is a strong preoccupation amongst children, and they tend to be excited about little else. For adults, it definitely feels as though we are fighting an enormous battle against media, since it comes with such a propensity to lure! It is of course noticeable, on the other hand, that preoccupation is a habit of the mind for young and old, that there seems to be no dearth of self-referential content, whether we are enticed by media or not. This habit is bound to make one blind to the outside world.

Many years ago, in an effort to help children take responsibility for what they had done and gain comfort in admitting, “I did it”, we would encourage them to speak honestly when we met as a group. Every time we met a group of children after a difficult incident, we reassured them with, “you know that adults here will not do anything to you”. We have tried many ideas—writing ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on slips of paper (‘yes’ implying that the child was involved in the misdemeanour and ‘no’ implying that she wasn’t), whisper in the adult’s ear to confess, talk to a senior student, talk to any adult she was comfortable with! None of this worked. We would also sit down for hours with children, waiting for someone to own up. On one such occasion, we were happy that a child finally confessed in the group. It was only later that we realised what had happened—“There is one way to get done with this. My stomach is rumbling, I can smell the dosas and it is past breakfast time. I’ll confess, even though I didn’t do it”. We certainly weren’t achieving

what we had set out to do! We also tried this amusing approach, “We know who it is. Whoever did it, please talk to an adult!” This last one worked once.

We continue to feel it is important for children to own up, but are no longer certain of the various methods in the list I have described in the preceding paragraph. Something is amiss if we need to reassure children who have been with us for many years and who already know that we won't resort to punishing them! What makes it difficult for them to own up? Is there something else at play that disallows this?

In our conversations with children, it emerged that they are overly concerned about how they are viewed by their peers. Underlying their interactions with each other is fear—fear of disapproval, of losing friendship and of being excluded. Children seem to comply with one another to make new friendships or keep the existing ones. This fear pushes many to continue being part of a group misdemeanour, even though they experience a nagging feeling that it isn't right to be involved in it. This feeling can also coexist with high excitement—there is a thrill that comes with ‘not being caught’ the first time, which drives them to seek more of the same experience. In responding to a recent incident in school, teachers met children in very small groups of two or three. The small numbers perhaps helped them respond well to our request for complete honesty. Having a conversation with an adult and only one or two other peers seemed to dissolve, to some extent, their worry about each other.

It is necessary for adults engaging with children to be able to discern the difference between playful mischievous deeds and malicious acts. Sometimes, our frustration in witnessing repeated misbehaviour makes it difficult for us to see this difference; every small prank then becomes a serious concern that needs addressing. It is valuable to also help children distinguish between what makes something a naughty prank and what makes it an act of meanness.

Many educators and psychologists see the need for a curriculum that emphasises care, kindness and mindfulness. When I read about such a curriculum on the internet, there was an uncomfortable feeling, almost a reaction in me to the words ‘kindness curriculum’. This reaction probably stems from the feeling that kindness is a ‘natural’ (and yet rare?) attribute in us and a specific programme to teach this must be superficial or artificial. This possibly also comes from the feeling that care and kindness is not merely an outcome of practising a list of kind acts! It is clear that we cannot simply adopt a curriculum, implement it, and be assured that children will now become kind and caring.

What we would like is for children to be alive to what they see around them and respond intelligently. It is perhaps this quality that we call 'care'. There cannot be a set of prescriptive responses that are taught to the young from which they wisely choose when desired! This is not to disapprove of the intent of the 'kindness curriculum'; rather it is a caution against passivity in the adults and children that comes with simply following a prescribed method.

The first step in learning about ourselves is to observe and acknowledge what we see within. There are ways in which we can make space for this observation in children. In exploring this approach, a few simple ideas came up. Role play, for example, helps bring one's feelings to view and at the same time, also see how others feel and respond. Reading aloud stories that attempt to speak to children about empathy and kindness, which children can easily relate to, usually work. Non-didactic, non-moralistic but intelligently written open-ended narratives could be used as conversation starters with children. Senior students too would be able to support adults in working with younger children. This is possible when there is adequate contact between the age groups in their daily life at school. This presupposes that the senior students are themselves interested in enquiring into different aspects of their lives, are insightful, and able to share their insights with young children.

Having said all this, one can never be quite sure what makes change possible in children! I feel this need not render our attempts meaningless or make us continually frustrated and disheartened that nothing works.

Although adults' struggles are much the same as those of children, I have focussed here on children alone. A bleak picture of children is not intended, neither is a romantic one of an enlightened adult!

# For Thinking Together

EDITORS



The moral education of the young is naturally of great concern to teachers, and there is a hoary tradition of using stories and fiction for the purpose of such moral instruction. From the *Panchatantra* to Aesop, stories have been used to convey simple (some might say simplistic) values and principles, and this has been true to some extent in the modern Indian educational context as well.

In 1997, Ms Ahalya Chari (Ahalyaji to those who were close to her), trustee of the Krishnamurti Foundation India and widely known and respected educationist and founder of this *Journal*, wrote a simple but profound book called *Thinking Together* which was published by the NCERT. This book too was about 'moral education' and used fictional situations, but with a very different slant from the traditional moral fable. Ahalyaji was concerned with the exploration of ethical questions by teacher and student alike, not just with the simple communication of messages. The adult and the child were voyagers on a journey of understanding the complexities of life, and the stories she narrated (drawn from simple everyday occurrences), opened up fundamental problems and questions that we all face. She stressed that there are no straightforward answers; rather, our sense of maturity and moral growth arise from our deep investigation, with a questioning spirit, of life itself.

Below, we have reproduced an extract from one of her chapters in *Thinking Together*. Inspired by her writing, the editors of this journal have come up with their own stories for investigation, and we have included some of these as well.

There was a general grumbling session on and they were talking about their teachers—some nine or ten students sitting by a lovely lotus pond. None of them watched the goldfish in the waters, for their eyes and ears and minds were on the conversation. They were discussing their teachers. Their feeling was that a teacher who develops a prejudice against a student

never drops it. However hard you tried, it was always the same story; the same distant look, the same harshness in the voice, the same remark in the notebook. They may talk of not having fixed opinions, but the students' experience was different. If they liked you, you could do no wrong; otherwise you were always in the wrong. "Teachers are very partial", they argued.

One of the girls said, "I don't like them generally, because most of them are so narrow-minded, conservative", using haltingly the latest word she had learnt in class. "Look! What is the point of having a co-educational school, if girls can't talk to boys or boys can't talk to girls? We have to sit separately, eat separately, and read separately. The other day, Saleem and I were together looking at the Encyclopaedia in the library to find out all about dolphins and there was Miss X giving me a nasty look. I wished I could have gone under the sea myself."

They conceded that there were exceptions and some of the teachers were wonderful people but in a large school like theirs, the verdict was that most teachers cannot be loved. Teachers are to be feared and obeyed.

In another corner of the school, correcting notebooks of various classes was a group of teachers discussing students. They felt that students were no longer eager to learn, no longer hard working and innocent as in their days. "They are a bunch of lazy, good-for-nothing kids," they grumbled. Gone are the days when you saw their eyes shine in class with understanding, when hands would be raised before they answered, when all their work was neat and tidy; something has gone wrong today. There may be exceptions but, on the whole, students are not interested in their studies. They are too distracted. Perhaps it is because of the cinema or the radio or the television. Their minds have become restless. They are pleasure-seeking. They are bored with everything except those things that arouse their sensations. "Their parents are to blame," they said, "Do you think parents have any time for children these days?" they argued. Yet another teacher said, "I don't mind their being pleasure-loving or even lazy but they are so arrogant these days. They no longer show any respect. They come to school because they have to. The other day one of the boys answered me so rudely that I could have punished him. I feel children should be dealt with very firmly". As this teacher spoke, you could tell from his face and his voice that he was smarting under a hurt.

*Have you thought about your own relationship with your teachers? Is it based largely on fear, or do you feel free to talk to some of them? ...What is your relationship with your parents?... Have you ever been hurt by them or by conflicts with them? How are you related to your classmates? Does anyone*

*bully you? Are you very shy by nature? Why should you allow anyone to bully you? Can you not be strong yourself?*

*Thinking Together, Ahalya Chari*

### **Growing up**

The beginning of the summer was here. The early morning breeze was still cool and pleasant. Later in the day the air would become so hot that it would make your clothes crinkle like paper. There was water at the bottom of the pond left over from the rains in November. Urmi threw a pebble in the pond annoying the frog. The ripples shimmered in the morning light. “Would these ripples upset a boat? Not a real boat, but may be a paper boat. What a weird thought!” A tiny smile lit her eyes up but immediately her brows furrowed together as other thoughts rushed in.

Five more days for the last board exam and she would leave this place which had been like a second home to her for the last nine years. She still remembered her first day of school and the fear that clutched her heart as she saw her parents leaving her to face her boarding school life. Similar dread was filling her at the thought of leaving school although the last two years had been terrible.

She was thought to be the coolest girl in the class until class 10. She was good at everything—studies, singing, dancing, games, and art. She was popular in the class. Both teachers and students were very fond of her. Yet here she was, dreading the thought of going to breakfast and meeting others. Already, Urmi was slowing her steps in the hope that others would be done before she reached the dining hall. She did not want to meet anyone; especially she did not want to meet Sandeep. He would plead with her to meet him at the dance cottage. The early morning classes would have finished by now and there would be no one there to disturb them. She would feel tempted by the invitation but would be sure to regret it later. Her mother had pleaded with her, before the board exams, to concentrate on her studies and not to be led astray by her emotions. She didn't like troubling her parents. Perhaps she should refuse to meet Sandeep. She could picture the wounded dog look on his face as she said 'no' to him. He was already deeply hurt by his parents' separation. If she left him now, he would lose faith in relationships. He needed her and she could not betray him. She was tired of these seesawing of emotions. Maybe she owed something to herself. She should perhaps skip

breakfast and just take refuge in the hostel after other girls left. That seemed the best idea at the moment.

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Nanditha saw Urmi quickly slipping into the hostel with her hang dog expression. "Had she missed her breakfast again?" Nanditha had a soft spot for Urmi. She had joined as a teacher the same year that Urmi had come into class 4. As was the tradition in school the new teachers and students were to put up a cultural programme for the fresher's programme. She still remembered Urmi's bubbly spirit. Her own apprehensions about being a new teacher disappeared when confronted with Urmi's effervescent spirit. She was only eight years old but she carried the wisdom of an eighty year old and was quite talented. She skipped, danced and hopped all the time. She was such an adorable girl. She still was but looked troubled all the time. She had hardly seen a smile on the girl's face in the last two years. What was it with these girls? What happened to their spirit as they grew up? Obviously she was seeking asylum in the hostel. She should be in school preparing for the last exam. Should she get her out or let her be?

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Sandeep was the first person to enter the dining hall. He did not want to miss Urmi. He had hardly four days left with her. On the last day she would be busy with her exams and would leave for home soon after. He waited till the last person had left. Urmi had skipped breakfast again. Was she avoiding him? Did she care for him? He could not control his emotions. He was worried. He was angry. He felt like smashing something. He could not afford to lose his temper now. He had already been sent home twice this term for erratic behaviour. He desperately needed to see Urmi. She was the only one who could calm him down. Only she understood him. Was she in the hostel? There would be no one around. Should he go in and meet her? If he got caught there would be another letter to his parents from the Principal. Things were already fragile at home. His mother and father would now fight about this. Each would blame the other for what they called his bad upbringing. He was desperate to see Urmi. There was no other thought in his head.

*What is the right kind of relationship?*

*How does one nurture a relationship without letting it erode you?*

*What is the role/effect of dependence in a relationship?*

## **The doorman**

Two men got into a Metro on their way home. They wore nice, expensive shirts, ties and trousers; socks and shiny shoes. They were chatting about work, and about how their boss was so rude.

“I don’t think he even sees beyond the end of his nose! Never, never has he looked at me properly and said even a good morning.”

“Exactly! Most of the time he totally ignores me. If at all he says anything, it is, ‘you haven’t yet filed your report’.”

“Yeah, he treats all of us as if we are furniture or something.”

“You have time for a quick dosa?”

“Why not...let’s try that new Pai restaurant, apparently it’s very good, and right across the street from the metro station.”

“Is it AC? It’s too hot, man. Can’t sit under a fan with this shirt and tie.”

“Yeah, of course it’s AC. Who can live without it, man!”

They got out at the next stop and crossed the street. The restaurant was very fancy on the outside. A man stood by the large carved wooden door. He was dressed in strange clothes, as if in costume for a play. The top was full-sleeved and layered, with several buttons, a coat on top of it all. His pants were tight, like churidars, and he wore the most uncomfortable shoes imaginable, pointy-toed and poking his feet. He had spent nearly eight hours in that spot already, and was due to finish his shift in half an hour. He saw two men crossing the street toward the restaurant, and when they were about five feet from the door, he opened it wide for them. A blast of cool air shot out from the inside, and they walked right in, not even noticing the doorman.

The restaurant was half empty, though some tables were occupied by groups, couples as well as singles. Finding an empty table by the window, the two men sat down and continued chatting. A waiter came up to them and asked what they would like. Hardly glancing up, they ordered a masala dosa each. In a brief pause in conversation, one of them looked up, and his eye was caught by a young couple sitting on the table next to them. Both were occupied with their own mobile phones—the girl was talking to someone and laughing softly, while the man was busy texting on his phone. This reminded him that he had better call up his wife and let her know that he would be late reaching home. Otherwise she would be mad at him. He reached into his pant pocket for his mobile phone.

*What preoccupations do we seem to live with in today's world? How does this affect our relationships and sensitivity to others? How does this matter?*

### **The stars in his mind**

The teachers were worried about the middle-school students. They seemed to know so much about the world, to have so much information at their finger-tips. "It is superficial knowledge," said one teacher. "They have a few words and feel they know a lot." "I am more worried about their lack of wonder," said another. "I take them star-gazing and all they want to know is how big the stars are or how far they are. Something about the magic of the cosmos leaves them totally untouched."

Some teachers spoke with the middle schoolers about a sense of wonder. They discussed with students about the beauty of nature and the importance of approaching life with an open mind. Tarun, a class 8 student, was confused after the conversation. He had a lot of big colourful encyclopaedias at home, with titles like *Astronomy for Kids*. He loved these books and the pictures in them. He also loved watching many astronomy documentaries on the internet. They showed nebulae and galaxies in beautiful colours and he often imagined what it would be like to fly around them in a spaceship. He would land on distant planets and have adventures. When looking at the night sky, he was full of excitement and wanted to share this with others.

*Was Tarun looking at the stars in his mind or in the sky? Was there a difference and did it matter?*

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How can education awaken a moral sense, a feeling of empathy with the other, in young people? Does such a sense need to be awakened at all or is it 'intrinsic' to the human experience? As educators, we will undoubtedly have our own models and theories in this complex field. What Ahalyaji's thinking stories inspire is a re-look at our assumptions as educators, the essential starting point when we consider our sense of responsibility for the young.

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## How Children See

DAVID MACDOUGALL



During the last few years two colleagues and I have conducted a series of video workshops with school children in different parts of India. The workshops were part of a five-year project entitled 'Childhood and Modernity: Indian Children's Perspectives' based at the Australian National University and funded by the Australian Research Council. Our overall aim was to gain new knowledge about how these children perceived and interpreted their surroundings, and what their perceptions could teach us about contemporary Indian society. We also hoped the children would benefit from the experience of looking at familiar things in a new way. In all, we conducted six workshops, of which I conducted four and the two others were conducted by PhD student volunteers. The workshops also employed a number of local assistants. The project made use of relatively inexpensive video cameras—hand-held consumer models of the sort that is familiar throughout the world. The children came from a variety of class backgrounds. The workshops were held in both urban and rural settings and ranged from Andhra Pradesh in the south

to Ladakh in the north, and from West Bengal to Rajasthan.

How does one go about understanding how others see, and what they choose to look at? One obvious approach is to equip them with instruments through which to look at the world. This is what we attempted. But the same thing has often been done for other reasons. In recent years there have been numerous projects with children that make use of both video and still cameras. A large proportion of these appear to have been designed with a therapeutic purpose, based on the assumption that if you give cameras to disadvantaged or troubled youth it will somehow solve their social problems. I immediately rejected this idea on several grounds. I was not convinced that fostering self-expression alone had the benefits often claimed for it. Nor did I feel that simply giving young people access to camera equipment was productive without creating a structure in which they felt they were using it for some purpose. All too often, video and photographic projects with children appeared condescending towards them, implying they needed improvement and

reinforcing existing power structures between adults and children. Children, I believe, ultimately sense this and feel diminished by it.

I took the view that because children see society from a unique position, they understand many things about it that adults do not, and there is much that we, as adults, can learn from them. It was important, I thought, that the children in the workshops understood they had something to contribute and felt they were actively engaged in creating new knowledge. The workshops were therefore organised as research projects. The children first chose topics they considered important in their own families or communities. They were then given basic instructions in using the video cameras, after which they began using them to explore their chosen topic. In the end they constructed a video report or film based on some of their material. The project offered them a chance to investigate subjects that are often not well known, or are known only from an adult perspective. For the most part they took this remit seriously and embraced it with enthusiasm.

The children were aged from ten to thirteen, and the workshops lasted from six to twelve weeks. For practical reasons each workshop could include no more than ten or twelve children, and most contained somewhat fewer than that. For the children, the workshops often seemed like a kind of experiment, but I regarded the entire project as an experiment, for

to my knowledge nothing quite like it had been tried before. For this reason I was prepared to see it change and evolve. The biggest change occurred early, in the selection of topics and in choosing the children who would participate. In the first workshop, at Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh, I proposed that the group decide upon a single topic, after which they would all contribute something to it, either individually or in pairs. But this meant creating the group first.

I held meetings with the two sections of class 7 students. I explained the project as best I could, answered questions about it, and announced that I would post a sheet of paper on a notice board. Any student who was interested in joining the workshop could put their name on it. I would then speak to those interested and select the participants. There were fifty one students in class 7. I discovered the next day that all of them had put their names on the paper. True to my word, I interviewed all of them over the next few days and finally selected a dozen. I wanted a varied group, not necessarily the star students, but rather a mixture of those who seemed interesting in themselves and had interesting ideas. Half of those chosen were boys and the other half, girls. I included a few who seemed difficult or eccentric but on whom I thought it was worth taking a chance. The group of twelve began meeting, and after several days and much argument finally decided on a topic.

Following this first workshop, I concluded that the selection process, of both children and topics, needed to change. The workshop had been enjoyable, I think, for all of us. At least, it had provided some variety and challenges for the students. But I felt the choice of a single topic was too restrictive. It allowed too little space for individuals to pursue their own interests, and it was often difficult for the group to come to any kind of agreement. In the next workshop, I decided to select the participants largely on the basis of the topics they proposed, as well as their reasons for wanting to join. This undoubtedly involved some subjectivity on my part, but perhaps no more than in the previous selection method, which had relied more on an assessment of individual character. This new method was followed in the next five workshops and I believe led to more diverse and useful results. Following this, each workshop produced several films, either made by individuals or small groups.

We made a number of observations while conducting the workshops. Because the children who took part varied so widely geographically and in background, it would be unwise to try to draw any general conclusions about how Indian children see their society or even their perceptual processes as children. One can, however, point to some interesting differences and unexpected results. Overall, we were constantly surprised by the children's choices and inventiveness. We had been careful not to dictate any

particular style of filmmaking, for one of the aims of the project was to see how they used the means available to them and what part their exposure to public media played in their creative decisions. The initial video training was basically intended to teach them how to hold the camera steady and get reasonably focused and viewable images.

One of the surprises was the sheer variety in the ways the children used the camera. I had expected that with their limited familiarity with visual media, which largely consisted of television and Bollywood cinema, they would be likely to imitate the models they found there. But perhaps because we were asking them to do something quite outside their usual experience—to film the reality of their own surroundings and to use the camera as an exploratory tool—they did nothing of the kind. I was constantly struck by the originality of their approach, and their departures from conventional cinema and television formulas. In a sense, they seemed to be reinventing filmmaking as they went along. To add to this, each film made by a child reflected the personality of the one who made it.

This is made clear by the films from the workshop held in Delhi. The children were from fairly poor backgrounds and attended a government-funded school, although one with connections to the Department of Education at the University of Delhi. This workshop produced only four films, but they couldn't have been more varied. One, by a boy, was about

the workings of a small, neighbourhood general store—the kind one finds on almost any street in Indian cities. Another was by a girl who wanted to explore the oppression of girls, and the privileges extended to boys, in families she knew in her area. The next one, by a boy, is almost indescribable, so I will only attempt to describe it later. The last was by a girl who asked the question: What do children do at home when no adults are present?

All these children were eleven years old. Besides the obvious range of topics, the style of each film was distinctive. The film on the general store seemed to have been made by a born ethnographer, for Ravi wanted to find out everything about the store and document it: who ran the store, who were the customers, what they bought, their relations with the owners, how the stock was replenished, how the money was handled, and so on. Anshu, the girl interested in the lives of girls, was the child most influenced by television and produced a kind of investigative journalism, interviewing different girls about their experiences and showing them doing piecework at home and household chores while their brothers played outside. She closes the film with a heartfelt address to the camera, filming herself at dusk on her rooftop, asking plaintively why girls can't be given the respect afforded to boys. Shikha, the other girl, made a calm, quietly perceptive film focusing on her younger brother and older sister, with simple scenes of getting up in the

morning, playing with the family dog, and occasional interactions with adults.

Aniket's film, the fourth, is for me a special case, because it successfully combines in a kaleidoscopic, almost anarchic manner aspects of daily life, performance, media technology, erotic attraction, and touches of Surrealism. Even more than the other films, it feels nothing like an adult's film; it could only have been made by a child. For example, I know of no adult filmmaker who would think of singing while he filmed, but Aniket does. He sings to a dog, to other children, and to a minutes-long image of himself in which he appears half asleep. What is also striking is that about two-thirds of the way through the film a new bride, aged about sixteen years, comes into the family. From then on, Aniket is fascinated by her, filming her in romantic images, and indeed, singing to her.

It would not be possible to describe further intricacies of the twenty-four films produced in the project, since they vary greatly in topic, style, and interest. But I shall turn instead to some more general observations about the experience of working with children in such diverse geographical, cultural, and economic settings.

The project asked of these children several unfamiliar tasks: first of all, to examine their own immediate experience and surroundings, which few had been asked to do before, and second, to analyse a specific topic, both visually and intellectually. Filming is in fact essentially

a process of analysis, since, in conveying any event or situation, the filmmaker must select certain salient points through the framing and selection of shots. Most of the workshops were conducted in cooperation with schools, and children from poorer areas and in government-funded schools often found it difficult to select topics or think about how to film them. They had rarely been asked to think independently, and their initial ideas for topics were very often those that had been impressed upon them by adults as being important. This kind of response was actually fairly widespread, for even the middle-class children tended at first to suggest topics they thought adults would approve, for example problems such as air and water pollution. Yet, unexpectedly, one or two of the most analytical films were made by children from schools in which rote learning was predominant.

I had imagined that in an age-range from ten to thirteen, the older children would make the more interesting and sophisticated films. What I discovered was the reverse. The films that delved most deeply into their subjects, and that seemed to take the most care in observing the physical world, were made by some of the youngest and physically smallest children, aged ten and eleven years old. Two that come to mind were both made by ten-year-olds: a film by a girl about her goat-keeping family and one by a boy about his father, showing him at home and in his daily work as a village barber. Whereas both these films were inventive

and multi-faceted, films made by children approaching adolescence seemed more circumspect and less experimental in their approach.

The actual physical size of the filmmakers also played a part in the ambiance the films conveyed. These films literally represent a “perspective from below”, because children see the world at a different level from adults. Physical objects seem to crowd in on one more closely and one gains a vivid sense of the spaces in which Indian families live—more so than in almost any of the films I have seen made by adults.

Differences in the social class of the children also revealed some significant contrasts. Before this project, I had conducted several trial video workshops in other schools and institutions. One was in a shelter for orphaned and homeless children in Delhi. The young filmmakers there were quite fearless in filming the most intimate aspects of their lives, including dressing and bathing, which in that place offered little privacy. They frankly filmed the sights they saw every day. By contrast, middle-class children in some of the other workshops had many more inhibitions about what they felt could and could not be filmed. Anything related to the body or to sexuality was immediately off limits, despite—or possibly because—they were either experiencing, or were on the verge of, adolescence. In one case a fairly innocuous scene of a boy not wearing a shirt was considered by the group too intimate to be included in the completed

film. It seemed that these children, whatever their behaviour in private, were highly conscious of what they wanted adults to see. They lacked the bravado of the children in the Delhi shelter, who would have been astonished at the reserve and seeming lack of independence of these middle-class children. The children in the shelter also tended to show more kindness to one another, and there was less bullying, than in a traditional, upper middle-class boys' school where I conducted another workshop.

I have mentioned only a few of the observations that have emerged from the workshop project and its precursors; more will undoubtedly come to light as we reflect upon it and make further study of the films themselves. Most of these comments have concerned differences rather than uniformity, but I will end by noting one phenomenon that did seem universal. Children in the video workshops became inordinately attached to their cameras. The project had four camera kits, which were used in each successive workshop. The children took good care of them, but even so I was amazed that the cameras survived six workshops without significant damage and with the loss of only one cable and one lens cap. It was a sad moment when, towards the end of a workshop, it was necessary to take back and pack up the cameras. The children often resisted, begging to be allowed to film for a few more days. Something else also began happening. In several cases, the children began treating

the cameras as living things, speaking to them as they recorded, sometimes in an embarrassed, half-joking way, as if they were friends or intimate companions. I will end by quoting part of what one boy said to his camera while walking along a grassy path as the workshop was winding up. It perhaps tells us that although the children's films have taught us a lot, for at least some of the children the experience of the workshop went deeper than we realised at the time.

Dear camera, we had amazing moments together ... and now is the day we have to leave ... disjoined, as you go to another owner and I take a new step in my second part of life. You are a great friend of mine, and shall always remain. And we together have learnt something of each other. Farewell, my old friend. Shall you live a happy and good life. The same with me.

### **Note**

Commentaries by a number of scholars on the films from the Delhi workshop have been published in TAPJA, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 15, no. 5, (2014): 453–79. The films themselves can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/7690450> using the password CIESCHOOL (all caps).

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## Attention is the Culmination of Intelligence

GEETHA WATERS



Holistic education is a celebration of attention rather than the act of recall. Attention is the vital component in human intelligence. It revitalises interest, is tangible as carrying a sense of vigilance and care, and plays an essential role in all healthy relationships inside and outside the classroom.

Unlike traditional ways of educating, where knowledge is worshipped as evidence of human intelligence, Krishnamurti's holistic approach challenges the passive accumulation of knowledge and celebrates the authentic feeling of attention. His passion and concern for life was able to whip up our interest to address the need to challenge conventional attitudes to intelligence at a time when it was measured on the extent of information acquired from an outside authority, the teacher. This shift from an acquisitive to an attentive state required me to relinquish a latent disposition to depend on a backlog of information. I began to appreciate that attention played a vital role in learning. Unlike the arduous process of interpreting and memorizing, attention registered the capacity of being spontaneously and comprehensively informed by the flux and flow of life.

At school, I observed the quality of attention at work by giving myself over to a serious discursive enquiry, while being aware of living in an indescribably beautiful landscape. Through an extensive exploration into the affective, social, cultural, and psychological implications of being part of a larger community, Krishnamurti created opportunities for us to consider questions which would not have normally occurred to us. Through his enquiry, we explored and examined the nature of our relationships, our feelings and the universal nature of thought. We also engaged in the inspirational and limitless capacity of human intelligence to ponder and wonder at the immensity of existence. His enquiry enabled us to muse on the nature of our intelligence without necessarily focusing on an outcome. This

was a refreshing change from normal classroom practice and it contributed to a sense that something momentous was afoot!

Watching Krishnamurti fearlessly enquire into the nature of his own thinking and listening as he expressed the deep concern he felt for the world, I found myself internalising the same kind of enquiry from my early years. As my enquiry into the nature of my thinking grew, it became increasingly more personal. My interest in the world was initiated by the enquiry and it imbued in me a sense of responsibility for the plight of the world. Out of this feeling of responsibility and concern, my attention was diverted to my own fanciful ways of processing information and I became acquainted with the dismissive and reactive plight of my ego from a very early age.

I never doubted that the sense of ego is a universal phenomenon, so in a sense the feeling of intense isolation normally attributed to severe forms of egocentricity was not an overwhelming occurrence in my life. My attitude to my ego was a healthy one, so I was always able to reach out and explore matters of concern with others I trusted and cared for during periods of crisis. An affectionate concern for the internal workings of the mind is a real benefit of holistic education and I feel that this kind of stewardship is not generally valued by the community.

The understanding that we are not alone with the problems we encounter in our day to day living arose from the shared exploration into matters of our collective consciousness during the public talks held by Krishnamurti at Rishi Valley and at Brockwood, during his annual visits. In his absence, the interest in serious and reflective enquiry into fragmentation and my own emerging inner dialogue between self and other was sustained by our weekly classroom dialogues which we students held during our senior years.

Owing to this shared background in mutual enquiry, I never doubted that the sense of ego is a universal phenomenon. I understood that it manifests in all individuals through the automatic act of recall. The nature of attention and how attention can throw light on all the subtle manipulations of our thinking was an area of great interest for me. I discovered that attention shed light on the limitations of my own assumptions as well as those of others. So, as a child, while I squirmed and fretted about being wrong, I also learned to put knowledge in its place.

The realization that intelligence need not be a victim of duality and is more than capable of facing facts, rather than repeatedly taking shelter within an already established knowledge base, was frequently demonstrated

by our holistic enquiry at school. I propose that holistic education improves our capacity to learn by blasting the boundaries normally cultivated by conventional education which is based on the accumulation of conceptually integrated information. Krishnamurti's holistic enquiry shatters the myth that one can be secure in the knowledge of one's own carefully constructed knowledge base.

Krishnamurti often addressed the nature of thought as relating to the past. I must admit that it was difficult to understand why the movement of thought surged forth and compared the present to the past. It was also difficult to understand why one relies on the past to feel secure! Thankfully, I was intrigued by the gradual spread of this imperative to feel secure. Understanding that the carriage of thought is laden with latent information which may no longer be relevant was an important milestone I crossed during my tweens. By the time I finished my year ten exams I was more than happy to realize the limitations of my existing knowledge base! However, taking this fact into account in my daily life was not an easy task.

Even as the passive repetitive nature of thought became clear, I was carried away by my petulant insistence that life conform to my ideas of it, just so I could enjoy the flush of satisfaction in getting things right! The dismissive nature of this demand and its capacity to ignore what is actually going on in life was troubling. I found that my interest often switched to the quality of attention which plays a vital role in determining the relevance of the information spontaneously accessible to me through my senses. Meanwhile, I had to deal with the persistent impact of my ego on my daily relationships. The desire to self-justify took its toll during the teenage years and I became increasingly isolated and reactive to the world. Blaming the world for the mess it was in only drove me deeper into a sense of apathy which registered as an appalling waste of time.

Thankfully Krishnamurti had always implied in his talks that, given that the world is in a state of crisis, we are all part of the solution. During my early twenties, while I was studying at the education faculty of Macquarie University in Sydney, I began to realize that I was immersed in a growing culture of discontent spreading across the globe. My discontent did not in any way set me apart! I sensed that only deep reflection and enquiry could unearth the reasons for my feeling of isolation and free me to engage with the community. During the 1980s and 1990s there was a swell of interest in Eastern philosophies and indigenous cultures as Australians began to look

for alternatives to our insatiable, progressive, capitalistic outlook on life. It is around this time that I realized that the culture of serious enquiry upon which Krishnamurti's holistic education was based would sustain my sense of psychological well-being well beyond my school years. Rather than dismiss society out of hand and indulge in various forms of meditations and fantastic remedies for elevating the spirit, I found that the spirit of enquiry continued to create a mature and inclusive regard for life as a whole. This enabled me to sustain mutually rewarding relationships through a serious exploration into the meaning-making processes we all employ to communicate with each other. So, the enquiry celebrating an attentive state does not stop with school, since it opens the door for lifelong learning, filling the mind with a sense of gratitude for the opportunity of a lifetime!

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# The Flow of Learning and Teaching

## Through forty years as a teacher

JANE SAHI



It is not unusual to have worked as a teacher for forty years, but to answer the question of what sustains us as teachers might be very different for each one. It is now more than forty years since I began learning how to teach, and looking back, I wonder what has given me energy through the ups and downs and roundabouts of working in a school.

In the 1970s, the children in the surrounding villages where I lived were, most of the time, not going to school. My first move was to provide a space for young children to come to play and learn at their own pace and according to their own interests through various activities. I was taken aback from the beginning because the children who came were not only the five year-olds whom I was expecting but, along with them, their older siblings, who were up to eleven and twelve-year olds. They had never been to school before. Perhaps the first lesson I learnt was just how much children learn from each other and how ready they were to take on responsibility for one another.

The children's enthusiasm and excitement were infectious. Many children came early in the morning and left only as it became dark in the evening. The children seemed so receptive to the quite limited resources we had. I was struck by their resilience; they rarely complained even when they were sick or even hungry. Many of the children had a strong sense of independence but also a close bond with each other so that they wanted to do things together. There was relatively little friction over sharing things.

I was not a trained teacher, but I was fortunate that soon after the school started, a newly trained teacher from Emerson, the Waldorf Teacher Training College in England, came and worked for nearly two years in the school. She was a remarkably gifted teacher, and I was privileged to be her apprentice, albeit a rather wayward one. One thing I noticed was that she was very reluctant to import the externals of a Steiner approach to the curriculum

and was much more concerned to find out what was appropriate in this context with these particular children. Perhaps the hardest lesson for me was to realize that I could be inspired by her but could not imitate her! I had to find my own way of being a teacher and take on only what could take root in me and become my natural source of energy. Trying to be someone whom we are not seems only to deplete our energy.

In the early days of the school, things were quite fluid but gradually a rhythm to the day, week and even the year emerged which seemed to anchor students and teachers alike. Nevertheless there were also spaces for the unexpected and the out-of-the-ordinary routine: a week of drama activities, days to prepare for a dolls' wedding, or open-ended time to make jewellery from paper, wire and beads that created a morning's bazaar to buy and sell home-made ornaments, and staying in the evening to observe the stars. Preparation for festivals gave life to all of us in the school so that making lanterns, doing dramas, making scrolls to tell a story and practicing dance and song channelled a lot of energy.

One of the joys of teaching was so often being surprised by children's questions, responses and solutions to problems. Energy comes from trusting in children's powers of imagination, practical skills and capacities to think things through. In the last few years, one part of the week was given to free choice activities. The children could choose what they wanted to do and with whom they wanted to work. Some chose to work alone and others would surprise us by working across ages and abilities. Sometimes a new craft activity was introduced and children were supported by an adult, but there were also activities that were done quite independently. A favourite activity was using a whole room to work together to create a landscape, a kingdom or a battle-field with wooden blocks and it was amazing to see how they added new elements to create a dramatic narrative. I remember an elaborate structure made with saris and desks that we took turns to wriggle through to be surprised by the secret treasure at the end.

For a number of years the school was so much part of my identity that it was hard to detach myself from the work, and that brings an ambivalent energy which can be both creative but also, not always balanced. It is not an energy that can sustain over a long period or weather the inevitable frustrations, failures and disappointments. There has to be some distance as well as engagement.

As the years went by, I also realized that it was not only children who needed space but I too needed space sometimes to be something other than

a teacher. Certainly children give us energy, but I needed to step back and give time and thought to things that recharged and nourished me: practical and mental activities that I enjoyed and were totally engaging. Energy comes for each through different sources and possibilities: running marathons, stitching quilts, writing poetry, grappling with difficult ideas, making puppets, meditation, growing vegetables or playing and listening to music. What is common to each of these is receptiveness to the present moment but also seeing all these within the whole of life so that the past, present and future have a unity.

Perhaps what saves us from being bored or being boring teachers is when learning and teaching are part of one stream. There is a story told about the renowned cellist, Pablo Casals. A fellow musician remarked that Casals was like a jeweller who could envision the grand and the whole but also could give his utmost attention to the tiniest element in the music he played. On one occasion, when Pablo Casals was 91, a student came upon him practicing. The student asked in bewilderment, "Master, why do you continue to practice?" Casals replied, "Because I continue to make progress." When I read this exchange I was struck by the confidence and diffidence of the great cellist and thought how, at the age of 91, Casals was still open to learning and receptive to something beyond his grasp.

The power of a teacher can be a frightening thing because for a brief time a teacher can be in a position to humiliate or undermine a child's trust in life itself. Authority used in this way is the antithesis of a positive or creative energy that sustains both teacher and student. There are some children who we do find difficult or who challenge us; they are sometimes very different from us but on occasion they are like us in ways that we find uncomfortable to acknowledge. The elusive part is to accept the other, free of both positive and negative projections, and on their terms, not ours.

In the last few years I have become increasingly apprehensive about talking about theories and ideals of education. It seems more important to try to respond creatively to the present moment and to engage with the child or children in front of you and to try and understand the hopes and aspirations of the communities they come from.

I am reminded of a friend who was a wood-carver. He commented that the real challenge for him in making a sculpture was to abandon or revise his pre-conceived design when he encountered an unexpected knot in the wood. Knots in wood are small hard, cross grained areas where a branch once grew,

and they lie hidden within the trunk. They may seem like imperfections, interruptions or distractions but they cannot be disregarded as irrelevant. The wood-carver had the skills and the tools but the question lay in the material itself and how to accommodate the unexpected and include its dynamic potential.

I once attended a most unusual workshop. It was about the teacher as a clown. The clown by nature has little power other than to make us laugh at ourselves and is mostly vulnerable in an upside-down world. The clown is ready to risk the unknown and stay with uncertainty. He is only unfailingly prepared for surprises which he or she takes as an opportunity for finding unlikely solutions. The woodcutter encounters the knots in the wood but the clown responds to the ambiguity, the mess and the folly of human nature with humour, insight and lightness. Ironically, it is precisely these qualities of powerlessness and lack of self-conscious dignity that seem to give strength to meet life in all its contradictions and complexities.

A story or poem sometimes lies dormant in us waiting for us to re-visit. I was reminded of a poem that I learnt as a child; it is called ‘Who has Seen the Wind?’ by Christina Rossetti.

*Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I nor you  
But when the leaves hang trembling  
The wind is passing through.*

*Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I  
But when the trees bow down their heads  
The wind is passing by.*

Our energy is rather like the air we breathe. It is all-pervasive and palpable in its absence but hard to define, calculate, grasp or control. Creative energy seems to come from sources that we cannot predict: our unanswered questions, times of uncertainty, seeing, as though for the first time, people and things that we thought we knew. Chance encounters with “all things counter, original, spare, strange”,<sup>1</sup> and the seemingly un-dramatic events of daily life have a beauty that gives us life.

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<sup>1</sup> From the poem ‘Pied Beauty’ by Gerald Manley Hopkins.

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# Learning Empathy

SREELAKSHMI SUDHAKARAN



I was nine years old when I first encountered the word ‘empathy’. Born and raised in Dubai, I am an only child brought up by parents who had both come from large, sprawling families back in India. Precocious and fidgety—as a lot of only children are wont to be—I had always been a fast learner, and usually did well in school as far as academics were concerned. During the parent-teacher interactions, the only standard complaint that my parents would receive about my engagement in school was about my tireless and incessant chatter.

In 2003, however, I started fourth grade in a new school, and I would hear something very different from my teacher that year during the first term parent-teacher meeting. Once again, academically, I was faring perfectly well, and there was nothing much that had to be said on that subject. On that little slip of paper that we received as our term-end report, there was, however, a column titled ‘Things to Improve’, and there were just a single word scrawled underneath the heading, in my teacher’s unmistakable handwriting: *Empathy*.

My parents’ crestfallen faces at that solitary comment are unforgettable even today. While my teacher talked on about the need to *empathize* and *understand the situation of the other children in the classroom as well*, all I could focus on was my parents’ reaction, nodding along furiously and agreeing with everything that the teacher seemed to be saying. Basically I was told that I needed to be more patient with the pace at which classes proceeded, for everyone needed to understand what was happening before we could all move ahead. Thoroughly puzzled as to what was going on—for *sympathy* I knew, yes, but what did *empathy* mean? I managed to divine, from the responses of the adults involved in the conversation, that whatever it was, it was absolutely indispensable, for not even my stellar marks seemed to placate my parents regarding my seeming lack of *empathy*.

That meeting, and the subsequent conversation with my parents that followed, left me wiser in two ways. Firstly, it was drilled into my head, at the tender age of nine, that the kind of person I am is worth far, far more than the kind of things I can do, or how well I can do them. Secondly, it left me with the impression of myself, albeit unconsciously, as inherently a rather insensitive, unempathetic person. Long after my parents were asleep, I remember consulting the dictionary in the quiet of my room that night, only to find that ‘*empathy: the ability to understand and share the feelings of others*’ was something that I could not, at age nine, comprehend.

Twelve years later, a couple of months before I was due to graduate from college, I visited The Valley School, my alma mater, to talk to some of my old teachers about the possibility of going back to teach there. Thoroughly disillusioned with the kind of higher education that I had received during my under-graduate studies, I was looking to come back to The Valley for a number of reasons. One amongst them was the need to inhabit a space where I could contribute meaningfully and creatively; another was, most definitely, the romantic, nostalgic bond that I had shared with the place during my high school years there. During a conversation that took place at the time of my interview, however, I was made aware of yet another reason that people seek out spaces like these to work in—the desire to live a different kind of life, one that is holistic and thoughtful and deeply sensitive; a reason that had not, up till this point, occurred to me at all.

The Valley, nevertheless, welcomed me with open arms that year, with raging monsoons and brilliant sunsets and a renewed, strengthened sense of topophilia. Old teachers and new ones treated me with affection and indulgence; old students and new ones received me with ease; old spaces and new ones rekindled memories and painted new ones for me. The place and the people all blended together into a fresh, familiar, magical acceptance. I was home.

Through the haze of joy and relief that seemed to permeate my early days of teaching at The Valley, however, a sense of inexpressible unease seemed to make its presence known every once in a while. While I was wholly thrilled to be back here, my parents’ reactions, when I had first told them that I would be teaching for a while after college, was mixed. Delighted as they were at the decision, their happiness had, nevertheless, been tinged with apprehension, some incredulity even, “You? You’re going to teach? You’re going to be handling young children? Really?”

Perhaps their apprehension fed into mine; perhaps my anxieties were all my own; but the unease did also stem from the fact that, for most of my life, I had never considered myself as someone who was *good with children*, for that took *empathy*, something that I most definitely did not think myself capable of. My love for The Valley, and little else, had brought me back, and I was willing to do whatever was required of me here. The idea of having to do the actual teaching, the actual engaging with children, was, nevertheless, a terrifying one.

I believe that the universe has a strange sense of humour, a delectable mix of irony and serendipity. Although I had initially requested to teach in senior school (an age group that was closest to my own, and hence I believed perhaps to be most relatable), I had been interviewed for work in the middle school (as vacancies were only available there at the time). It was only on my very first day of work that I was told that, owing to emergency re-staffing at the last minute, I would in fact be working with class 1.

And so it was, in my very first year of teaching at The Valley, against all odds and despite all apprehensions, I worked with the first grade. My discomfort with what I was going to have to do was, luckily, overshadowed by my gratitude at having a place here at all. In retrospect it seems like this is what propelled me to go on as I did: to teach the first grade, and teach it, for all my fears, as well as I could, and, in the process, enjoy myself so unexpectedly, intensely, and completely.

This is my third year of teaching. In the time that I have been here, I have had opportunities to interact with almost all sections of the school: from teaching the first grade, to Psychology in senior school, English and Library with the eighth-grade and the middle-schoolers, and now house-parenting for the eleventh-graders. The kind of interactions I have had, and continue to have, with children across the school have been richer and more varied than I could have ever dreamed of. On a daily basis, I find myself having to switch perspectives, to change lenses, to constantly glimpse a world different from mine in order to engage with the other. There is the fresh wonder one feels upon spotting a firefly in the dark, or discovering the Latin roots of words, or watching spoken word poetry for the first time; the irrepressible curiosity one can have about insects, and birds, and the opposite sex, and even the inherent nature of humanity; the pain of rejection upon having to spend 'free-play' alone, or not wearing the 'right' kind of clothes, or watching a friend drift away from you; the unbeatable frustration of not

being allowed to climb trees when it's time to do math, or having to take off your socks each time you enter the library, or juggle school work and college applications and relationships; the incandescent joy in going for a walk to the banyan tree, or spending hours and hours on the basketball court, or receiving a 'Well Done!' on an assignment for which sweat and blood and tears have been spilled.

Recently, a colleague of mine made a passing comment about how she thinks that I am *so good with the children!* It caused me to stop short. My teacher's remarks and my parents' discomfited faces still fresh in my memory, I accepted the compliment uneasily. In my third year running, doing what I have come to love more than anything in the world, I still find it difficult to think of what I do as something that comes naturally to me. It is hard work, this relating. When later that day I mulled over what she had said, though, I could not help admitting to myself that this is hard work, and good work, and the stage for the most fruitful kind of learning.

When I walk into a classroom today, the biggest challenge I face—a challenge that I see so many of my colleagues struggling with as well—is not homework, or handwriting, or even motivation towards excellence—it is *empathy*. In a world growing increasingly more fragmented and divided, spaces like our schools, amongst others, concerned with learning about the "...totality, the wholeness of life", are becoming all the more relevant. Surprisingly, though, this particular frustration that I face—of increasing insensitivity in the world today, which naturally translates into so many everyday interactions around me, some that I myself am a part of—has not left me despondent or cynical in the least; on the contrary, I find that these years have left me softer than before.

I think back, quite often, to that initial conversation at the time of my interview, about how teaching and working in spaces like these is far more than a career choice. It is a lifestyle choice. The truth in this assertion has never been clearer to me than it is now, as I watch children learn, not as much from what is said and done in the classroom, but instead from the lives that their teachers lead outside of these walls. I find myself pausing to think before I speak, catching words before they spill out of my mouth, to examine them closely, before I let them escape me, and deem them worthy of an audience as absorbent and ready to learn as the one that I am constantly surrounded by. My tastes, preferences, choices are influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by what I think my students will benefit from—whether it is willingly taking a helping of a vegetable dish that I dislike during lunch-

time, expressing a political opinion as carefully and in as unbiased a manner as I can, or even learning to be more patient, more forgiving, with myself, as much as I am with someone else. My students inspire me towards greater sensitivity and compassion, just as much as, and maybe more than I can ever hope to do so for them.

I am twenty-three years old today, and *empathy* is a topic of daily conversation in the life that I live now. I see around me a world rife with strong opinions and rigid judgments, with very little space in between all of these for diverse narratives to co-exist. I do not pretend to as yet comprehend, in its entirety, this elusive quality; but the absence of it is, to me, a hard, harsh reality. And so I find myself attempting to live a different kind of life, one that attempts to be holistic and thoughtful and deeply sensitive. I am no longer able to separate the teaching from the learning, the working from the living. Topophilia brought me back, but something deeper compels me to stay. And let's hope—for the sake of that bemused nine-year-old all those long years ago—that I finally learn something of *empathy* along the way.

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## A Lost Port-City and Our Quest

AKHILA SESHADRI



Muchiripattanam, or Muchiri or Muziris was, “The city where the beautiful vessels, the masterpieces of the *Yavanas* [Westerners], stir white foam on the Periyar, river of Kerala, arriving with gold and departing with pepper” (from *Akananooru*, a collection of Sangam Age Tamil poems). It was, “The city where liquor abounds”, which “bestows wealth to its visitors indiscriminately” with “gold deliveries carried by the ocean-going ships and brought to the river bank by local boats”. It was, according to Pliny the Elder, “The first emporium of India”. The city appeared on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a fifth-century map of the world as seen from Rome. But, after that, this port disappeared from the maps into the mists of legend and folklore.<sup>1</sup>

In 1341, a great flood on the Periyar led not only to widespread submergence, but also to the shifting of the river’s course leading to the end of a glorious era of trade, and of a by-and-large benign political rule in the region.

Today, if one travelled to North Paravur, and slightly further north, along one of the many channels of the Periyar delta, one would come to Pattanam, a small village, like any other that one would come across in Kerala. An interesting thing that would happen, however, was that after the monsoons, children would find beautiful beads that were brought up through the soil. After a preliminary dig in 2003–4, followed by several attempts to discover what lay beneath Pattanam, the stories of surfacing beads and pottery took a few archaeologists to the village. In 2007, Pattanam yielded its secrets. The Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR) along with the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India), and other independent bodies have by

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/10/lost-cities-3-muziris-india-kerala-ancient-port-black-pepper>. Please see this article for a more detailed account of the historical antecedents of Muziris and the archaeological findings at Pattanam.

now unearthed nearly 129,083 artefacts and about 516,676 pot shards from over sixty trenches that cover just over one per cent of the mound. Now many archaeologists and historians agree that this was probably the site of the ancient port of Muziris.

From this fascinating tale of a port lost and then recovered, came the idea for a history trip to Kerala for the students of class 8. Unlike the other two history trips to Hampi or Thanjavur, which we had undertaken in previous years, this area has very little by way of dramatic remains. There are no huge fort walls, temples, or other evidence on which to build this trip. Instead, over five days, we visit different destinations and through observation, questioning and conversations attempt to understand the varied themes that are interlaced and waiting for further exploration.

### **So many religions, so many people**

The first theme that begins to emerge is the theme of multiplicity of religions, in a cosmopolitan and friendly co-existence. This is perhaps in sharp contrast to the rising trend of strident reiterations of homogeneity of an imagined cultural past in the country. On the day we usually reach our destination Kottapuram, in Kodungallur, we begin with a visit to a small village in Chendamangalam and the Kottayil Kovilakam (literally, a palace within a fort). Here, one can walk from a Jewish Synagogue (a museum, now) on a Jewish street, to an old church, certainly among the oldest in India, the broken down ruins of a seminary within the church compound, and then to a little temple on a hillock. On two slopes of the hillock, there is a Jewish cemetery with tombstones filled with Hebrew characters, and a modernised mosque. All this lies within a square kilometre. Just a walk to each of these places is a lesson in heterogeneity and plurality. For, if one were to go by the village's name, one understands that all that land belonged to the local ruler, who was magnanimous towards all religions. There are also Konkani settlers from Goa and Gujarat whose ancestors had come seeking refuge from the Catholic Christianity of the Portuguese. We usually speak about them when we visit the *papadam* makers, for we learn that this art of *papad*-making along with weaving was brought here by the asylum-seeking Konkanis.

Last year, the students sat on the hillock working on their study sheets and we listened to the '*Om namo narayanayah*' droning in a loop from the temple. Interestingly, when the muezzin of the mosque gave the call for evening prayers, the young priest switched off the chant. It resumed later.

When we had the evening conversation with students, my sense was that this modern courtesy touched them as much as the older wisdom.

Many such cross-cultural practices can be garnered through the trip, if you look closely. For instance, Kerala's stone *vilakkus* (lamps) are part of its temple's culture. Yet, studying the well-written treatises on Jewry in Kerala, one understands that each Jewish house also had, at its entrance, a stone *vilakku* that was lit in the evening. As we walk towards the river jetty, it is usually late evening, and we see the lamps lit on the portico and thresholds of the houses even today.

### **The remains of an age**

We spend an entire day at Pattanam. Pattanam is, unlike other archaeological digs, welcoming of children. There is a Children's Museum, and the staff help children understand what is happening here. The students are introduced to archaeology, the specific ways in which trenches are dug and artefacts sorted out there. We walk towards the various sites to see the wharf, the canoe that is still *in situ* and then in groups of three, go around the museum. The Pattanam team have created a workbook for children to use and make sense of what they have seen in the aesthetically created and well-maintained museum.

### **Re-creation, restoration and protection**

We stay at a missionary run hostel called Vikas Albertine Animation Centre in Kottapuram. It is a peaceful place and we are looked after by the nuns and fathers of that centre. At Kottapuram is the 'Muziris Market'. It is the site of the local market that happens twice a week. This was not the landing place for goods at the time of ancient Muziris, but an effort has been made to bring back the market place and restore or re-create the buildings around the bazaar according to the style that used to be there. Going through the hustle and bustle of the wholesale market, students see the large quantities of perishables: fruits, vegetables, fish and herbs. They get a glimpse of other goods that are brought by tempos and trucks and sold: jaggery, oil, *chunna*, nets, and baskets as well.

### **Black gold**

Pliny the Elder complained about Rome's annual deficit caused by trade imbalance with India at 50m sesterces (500,000 gold coins of a little less than eight grams), with, "Muziris representing the lion's share of it". And all this could be attributed to the demand for pepper, which could be seen

as the ancient equivalent of 'black gold'. When this demand died due to various reasons, the trade also declined. This could have been one of the many reasons for the disappearance of the Muziris. The final death knell was the fourteenth century flood that made the port disappear, the river shift south and created the harbour that is now Kochi.

We visit the Spice Market in Mattanchery, Kochi, on the final day of the trip. By this time the students have visited two Jewish synagogues; a temple important to the Cheras at their ancient capital at Thiruvanchikulam, the Cheramun Mosque—the oldest mosque in India; the traditional *naalukettu*, the Dutch Palace museum, besides spending an entire day at Pattanam. In Kochi, the students look at the wide variety of spices, and try to understand how even a single spice can make and break a trade.

The trip from Kottapuram to Kochi is in itself a lesson in changes that have taken place over the ages. It is a shock to the senses that have by now become used to the quiet backwaters of an ancient river, and small towns with small houses, to arrive back into a modern-day city with skyscrapers, traffic of immense proportions, huge container trucks, a vast port with ships of varying sizes, cranes and so on. In the Jew Town at Mattanchery we look at old abandoned houses of the Jews who have migrated to Israel, whose doorways still have the *Mezuzah*, a framed parchment with specific verses from the Jewish Torah inscribed on it. One of the houses has been bought by a Roman Catholic who believes that it must not be modified or changed. Every two years, when the Kochi-Muziris Biennale is held, this building exhibits paintings and installations.

Each year, we have had slightly different experiences. For two years, we were able to look at another syncretic performing art, the *Chavittunatakam*. This dance form involves a lot of complex stamping of the feet on the ground. The artistes dress elaborately, and the stories are from the gospel or from Christian lore. It incorporates elements of *Kalarippayattu*, opera, Tamil folklore music and biblical themes to create a distinctive style of its own. On the island of Gothuruthu, sometimes thought of as the birthplace of this dance form, we were able to see the performance of local artistes.

On another occasion, we were lucky enough to interact with the last Jewish resident of Kottayil Kovilakkam, Eliahu Bezallel who is 84 years old. Though a citizen of Israel, he bought the plot where his ancestral home had been and built a house there. He spoke of the times when there was a flourishing Jewish community there and of his strong attachment to the

land of his birth. The questions of nationhood, land of birth, the Jews need for a place to call their own after the Second World War, were implicit in the conversation and the students had a modest glimpse of a difficult chapter in history.

The Muziris Trip to Kerala is seen as a quest, as an enquiry into the past and its relation to the present. A key idea has been to show students that the past is not a separate entity, with a present an absolute break from this, but that two could co-exist; one could inform and change the other; and that the exigencies of time are ever present.

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# Reflection, Empathy and Action

## Insights from educational spaces

PALLAVI PHATAK



Teaching in a school and being involved in its institutional aspects, studying education formally, working with teachers, and teaching students of education can, ironically, shift one's certainties about what education of the young should concern itself with. Each of these encounters with education, with their particular impetuses, has created synergies and tensions in understanding what the aims, methods and material of learning must be. What has come up repeatedly and steadfastly, though, is the significance of reflection, empathy and the action born thereof, as touchstones in educational thought and work.

There are numerous conceptions of 'education'. Depending on a focus or interest area such as philosophy, psychology, or sociology, the question 'what is education?' can produce at least three different kinds of answers. Another way of answering the question has been through the binary of theory versus practice. This article does not concern itself with creating a conception or definition of education. It attempts to bring to the fore certain key aspects of living—reflection,

empathy, and action—and how they play out in the work of education.

I use three incidents picked from various contexts of teaching and learning to explore this perspective. The first is a scenario, from work done with teachers, which was inspiring for us. The second was a teaching moment that was challenging. The third was a conversation with a student that shed light on a quest that I consider important to pursue.

### **Story One: Permissions, possibilities and paths through reflection**

This story is from a time when I worked as a project coordinator for a non-governmental organization with the aim of supporting school administrators and teachers of specific low-cost schools for the underprivileged in making shifts towards a more meaningful education for their students. In a school serving the children of daily wage labourers, teachers sought ways to teach so that their students learned better and developed the right set of values to live well. In light of the burning need for interventions and support for teachers in these rapidly failing aspects at school, a move to initiate weekly teacher-run staff

meetings, meant for sharing questions, thoughts and discussion of ideas, was met with a mix of awkwardness (around sharing thoughts), cynicism and inertia. The teachers' resistance was evident in thoughts which they, after months of 'ice-breaking' and deconstructing authority, began to share: "It is taking us away from 'actual' work", and "talking won't solve problems we face in the classroom". So we came to a consensus to try out the meetings until there was a unanimous feeling that they were not serving us in any way. (The meetings did stop taking place eventually, after about a year. This was not because the teachers felt they were not relevant but due to a possible insecurity in the leadership about growing autonomy in the teaching group).

In the beginning, the teachers struggled with the notion of sharing thoughts in a group. It was foreign to them and they did not really understand its worth. I struggled with feelings of disappointment around this, having experienced and benefited from staff meetings that helped me grow as a teacher. We persisted with the meetings, nevertheless, to keep the promise we made to ourselves. With time and attention, the teachers began to notice some of their patterns of expressing and sharing. These included directing questions and thoughts to me rather than to the whole group, using the meeting time to complain rather than contemplate, and restricting themselves to functional statements such as reminders and announcements. It became apparent

that the scope and possibilities of staff meetings had to be demonstrated in some sense. So we came up with and sifted through conversation topics. We deliberated on how we might talk together about these topics in ways that made the educational work of the school a collective effort. What emerged was the necessary structure to encourage and support the process of reflection. This involved adopting certain guidelines such as:

- Asking questions without judging them and at the same time actively noticing different kinds of questions that others may be asking.
- Not viewing questions as criticism but as tools for exploration and clarity building.
- Being aware about why I say/do what I say/do and how the reasons change over time.
- Recognizing/sorting opinion from fact, and recognizing/understanding one's biases.
- Appreciating each other's ideas and creating an environment that is respectful.

The next step was to find elements that could infuse life into the conversations and make the meetings valuable to its members.

For instance, we were thinking of creating a school that was a friendly environment for children. This fundamentally meant a school that did not operate on fear and one that regards children's feelings and thoughts. Infrastruc-

ture, policies, and norms were changed to meet the aim of creating such a school. However, the teachers realized that creating the culture for a fearless school rested squarely on their shoulders. In the initial meetings they realized various fears that existed within them: fear of authority, fear of speaking, fear of not being heard, fear of doing things differently and of being judged, to list a few. They realized that they could not create a fearless environment for their students if they could not speak about their own fears. This, in itself, was very significant!

Apart from sharing in staff meetings, many of the teachers wrote down their thoughts in a weekly journal. Through this mode of reflection, many of the teachers seemed to notice that getting in touch with themselves made it easier for them to get in touch with children. *How did this happen?* I saw this as a movement within them, of inward looking leading to outward looking. The reflective journal allowed them to acknowledge some of their thoughts to themselves. Thoughts that they felt could be shared were brought into the meetings or discussed with colleagues (myself included). Over time it emerged that reflection was not an idea. It was a practice, a daily aliveness. We came to realize that we had to look inward every day in order to look outward every day. Through this, teachers saw their responses change towards children and each other in small measures.

As I have been a part of educational environments where introspection and

thinking through matters is taken for granted, certain patterns of conversation, ways of articulating questions and making meaning of thoughts or actions may have set in. This could lead to a limited understanding of other 'cultures of conversation' as well as other triggers and material for reflection. Therefore, I had to shatter these set patterns and notions of conversation, questioning and responding that were in me. This was imperative to meaningful dialogue with the diverse teacher groups I was a part of.

What then did our conversations look like in the life and substance of the staff meetings at this school? We consciously stayed with our feelings from instances of daily interactions that each of us was a part of. We resisted the move to explore our feelings and thoughts through abstraction. As an example, we talked together about one teacher fearing another's judgement. That the teacher felt free to bring to the group something as vulnerable as this was remarkable. We all tuned into her articulation of a sensorial experience of fear. These moments provided her and us a factual base from which insights about fear could be drawn.

These meetings were inspiring for a couple of reasons. Firstly, they helped me see that reflection needs to be built from first principles: looking without preconceived notions and listening without the urge to supply a reason or to make a prediction or conclusion. What was particularly moving was the realization that building these cannot come about

if we do not hold ourselves and others with tentativeness and care. An idea about what reflective sharing must comprise and sound like could come in the way of extending this care. Secondly, these meetings put me in direct contact with the enabling nature of reflection because of the way it helped many of us build a relationship with ourselves and with colleagues. These relationships were empowering; they created the base for strength that arises out of an active, informed and thinking collective.

### **Story Two: The challenge of shifting perspective**

While teaching an undergraduate course on human development and teaching-learning, one of the classes was a discussion about corporal punishment and the impact it could have on the development of children. One student felt quite strongly that a whack to discipline a child is fine as many people, “do better in life because of it.” It was a statement of conviction inferred from her lived reality and, therefore, not something I had the right to dismiss in any way. Actively keeping aside my own and others’ reaction to her resulted in a state of empathy and curiosity. This took on the form of open-ended questions that all of us, irrespective of our positions, could consider. The questions were: “What does ‘better in life’ mean that we need corporal punishment to get us there?” “While a whack may have got us to the study table and kept us there (due to fear), what else was lost in us?” While I was clear about the right

position on corporal punishment and could have presented various theories to gently challenge the student’s view point, why did I end up talking around open-ended questions?

My cue was their faces and body language that seemed to communicate some of the discomfort that comes from being judged. As a respectful learning space was something we had all committed to, it followed quite naturally that I be aware of the assumptions I was making about these students’ reality. When I did not immediately understand why punishment was a ‘life saver’, I realized I needed to explore it with them more. These students *felt* that their perspective was legitimate, given the contexts and trajectories of their lives. Thus, while I found myself reacting to the position held by this set of students, I also found myself empathizing with them, trying to understand their situation. Why did they hold this viewpoint? What ‘worked’ for them as a result of this upbringing? I felt that challenging their perspective without empathizing with it first would have been an insensitive response based solely in ideology.

Empathy made the open-ended questions *equal* for everyone; our starting points for exploration were roughly the same. Grappling with the second question, on what was lost due to corporal punishment, was emotionally difficult and as such was not opened up too much. Nevertheless, they did come to a point in the exploration where there was a faint

acknowledgement of the disrespectful, violating and debilitating nature of corporal punishment. The first question, ‘What does ‘better in life’ mean, that we need corporal punishment to get us there?’ revealed answers pertaining to having a better quality of life, which is ensured only if, in many of their cases, they managed to graduate from class 12 and an undergraduate programme. Overall, a better quality of life, they felt, is marked by discipline and self-regulation so that they can keep down a job or higher studies, contribute socially and economically, and thereby, flourish in their lives. When it was agreed that ensuring such a life is a legitimate concern, what we did go on to challenge was the use of adult power, fear and punishment to create discipline and self-regulation. This created the ground for us to brainstorm other ways to develop perseverance, consistency, responsibility, regulation and initiative—factors leading to a better quality of life. It helped us see that the purported results of corporal punishment could be achieved through other means.

Theoretical perspectives were then presented. For some students, the linking of their reflection to findings from studies was disconcerting. We stayed with this feeling as I felt it was essential to the process of creating a shift in perspective, which is something that did happen for some of them. With others, I could not tell how they were processing it at all—the open-ended questions, the brainstorming, and the theoretical perspectives.

This was a particularly challenging moment for me as an educator teaching young people who hoped to become teachers one day. I learned from it that any topic in the study of education needs to be looked at from theoretical perspectives and engaged with through self-reflection. Theoretical perspectives are relatively easy to present. However, those perspectives alone do not seem to trigger a radical shift in one’s deeply held positions. What is perhaps more challenging is to create appropriate openings for self-reflection and weave insights into theoretical understanding. Relying solely on self-reflection to explore a topic is problematic in that it could tend to confirm one’s already held position. Utilizing only theory to understand an issue often relegates it to the machinations of the intellect. The specificity of the challenge therefore seems to lie here: At what points in the engagement with a topic or problem do we bring in knowledge born of the experiences of the self and at what times theoretical knowledge? How do we facilitate personal reflection and exploration in learning contexts, in emotionally safe and appropriate ways, to yield insight? How and when do we point out the limitations of both theoretical knowledge and knowledge of the self?

### **Story Three: The way of mindful action in education**

Curriculum is a vibrant topic of discussion and study in education. The primary point regarding what should constitute a curriculum is that of aims and objectives. Once, such a conversation with a student

of curriculum studies seemed to capture some prevalent perspectives with regard to what education ought to do. With great depth of emotion, the student believed that education should have only one purpose, that of enabling social change. He felt that the aims of education and curricula in schools must be developed keeping this in mind. Early in the conversation I noticed that two aspects were being pitted against each other: 'thought' and 'action'; in another context, 'the individual' and 'society'. Interestingly, the former and latter binaries were used interchangeably in the student's argument which stated that 'indulging' in thought or the individual self leads to inaction and lack of engagement with society. I found myself responding with a 'yes' and 'no' when asked if I agreed with his argument. My affirmative came from observing the tendency, both within myself and in others, to enclose oneself in the long and enticing journey of understanding the mind. Indeed the possible fallout of such a journey could be self-absorption. The aspect of his argument that I disagreed with stemmed from this perspective: essentially as social beings, each of us is a component of the various relationships we are a part of. If society is an aggregate of relationships, how can we engage with it meaningfully without understanding ourselves simultaneously?

We spent some time trying to get a feel for what makes something 'meaningful'. We saw that the intertwining of our inner selves with our outer lives is what makes engagement meaningful. With our

unique set of experiences and viewpoints we make sense of a matter outside of us, and that 'sense-making' feeds back into our perspectives. Further, through this conversation, and several others, it appeared that a couple of challenges exist in the process of meaningful engagement with society. One challenge is the absence of a language of communication that is built by first acknowledging and allowing, for oneself, a range of feelings and thoughts. The next step is to be comfortable with communication. All this is contingent upon an emotionally, not necessarily intellectually, safe environment. The second challenge is a genuine lack of experience in the ways of dialogue, a mode of exploration with people that could help us make sense of how our personal experiences integrate with goings-on around us.

Now, assuming that the language, skills and comfort for dialogue exist, a deeper implication for equal engagement with the inner and the outer is revealed. This is the ability to discern a 'personal' response to any issue or situation from a serious, impassioned one. A 'personal' response, though a legitimate one, is often immune to examination by oneself or by others. This is perhaps because 'personal' responses often seem to be marked by the need to have one's theories or stand (sometimes, maybe, the entire self) validated, and as such seeking the formation of a similar community or group. Accepting, empathetically, that this is a very human need or movement of the mind,

what can free us, however, of its fear-filled and narrowing nature? By keeping this question alive we could perhaps find out what it means to respond to and engage with the world in non-personal but serious and im passionate ways.

The call for social change, especially through education, is urgent, justifiably so. The pull into the difficult and much needed work of responding to inequality, injustice and destruction that is around can be very strong. However, what would make the response, action, effective?

Essentially it would mean being aware of one's relationship with an 'other', be it a group or community or a cause or issue. This is vital so that we do not conflate our feelings that have a particularly personal genesis with quiet, wisdom-filled outrage towards all that is inhuman around us. It is this very discernment that brings clarity to the process of understanding a cause or issue and removes the 'individual' or 'self' from it.

As a teacher, student of education, and interestingly as a teacher of education, I found several theories, frameworks and approaches compelling. What has enabled critical engagement with theory, eclectic practice, and growth, has been reflection and empathy—Reflection about why I am compelled by or resist a theory / approach / framework / perspective and empathy for where I am and for where my students and colleagues are. This kind of reflection and empathy has almost always provided the much needed pause before and during 'action'. And so it appears that 'mindful action', something that I am slowly learning about, seems to involve being aware of one's limitations and capabilities with equanimity, recognizing argumentation that is led and fed solely by the intellect, seeing how one's feelings drive a conditioned response, trying to explore something with another from his or her ground as much as from mine, and most importantly, always being aware of my motivations to 'act'.

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## Book Review

### 'The Reflective Teacher': A Review and Some Reflections

ALOK MATHUR



#### *The Reflective Teacher: Case Studies of Action Research*

Neeraja Raghavan (2016)

Contributing Editor: Vineeta Sood

Orient Blackswan, 254 pp, Rs 270/-

'The reflective teacher' is a phrase that has been much in vogue in education circles for at least the past two decades. At the outset this may evoke a hazy image of a somewhat thoughtful teacher one might be happy to see teaching in our schools. The phrase became common currency sometime after the publication, in 1983, of Donald Schon's *The Reflective Practitioner*. This influential book, sub-titled *How Professionals Think in Action*, characterized in considerable detail and depth the creative ways in which skilled practitioners in diverse other professions—such as engineering, architecture, town planning, psychotherapy and management—identify, frame, think through and act upon issues or problems that emerge in the course of their practice.

Considerably earlier than Schon, as early as 1933, John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, in his book, *How We Think*, had developed an account of human processes of problem-posing and problem-solving that result in productive thinking in various domains of human experience. Dewey too had proposed that it is only through a process of 'reflection on experience', that our experience may result in an enriched understanding and personally validated practical knowhow. Such reflection, Dewey suggested, is akin to a form of 'scientific thinking' applied to everyday life situations, but with the added dimensions of value and purpose. Building on these ideas, Schon developed a more detailed account of what he termed as 'reflection-in action', which he maintained is necessarily an intuitive, iterative, non-linear and often cyclical process, that may can be active even as we go about engaging in our practice. Through this reflection, individuals may challenge closely held assumptions, and deepen their grasp

and engagement with the complexity of life situations, characterized as they are by ‘uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts’.

The ideas from Schon’s book were quickly picked up by practitioners of school education and teacher educators, who saw them as highly relevant to the teaching profession. Teaching—which has often been narrowly viewed in instrumental terms as simply ‘delivery of content’—was acknowledged as being a multi-layered engagement with living, thinking persons in complex social and institutional contexts, towards educational purposes and aims that are value-laden. Critical reflection and imaginative responses to situations that arise in the course of one’s own teaching practice were considered as essential for ‘good teaching’. A plethora of writings emerged from the late 1980s onwards upto the present day, focussing on the qualities of reflective teaching, and proposing a variety of approaches to developing ‘reflective teachers’.

In the Krishnamurti schools too the process of education, of teaching, learning and upbringing, is necessarily viewed as a multi-layered extended engagement, drawing upon many levels of the being of a teacher and the students. Teaching is seen as not just a profession, but also as a way of life, with an undeniable impact on the way individual students grow up and respond to the challenges of living a wholesome life in complex and difficult times. Informed by the teachings of Krishnamurti, these schools especially value ‘self-awareness’, ‘the quality of attention’, ‘observation’ as well as ‘reflective abilities’ in a teacher.

However, to most people in schools the idea of a ‘reflective teacher’ may be a vaguely held notion and it is hardly ever articulated in explicit terms. We may ask: What is the nature of reflections that a teacher might engage in? How does the reflective teacher relate with students, the subjects s(he) teaches, the teaching-learning process, and the predicaments s(he) finds herself confronted with in the course of her/his life as a teacher and a human being? And more to the point, if this is such a desirable quality, what could possibly make for ‘reflective practice’ in a teacher? Neeraja Raghavan’s recent publication, *The Reflective Teacher: Case Studies of Action Research* brings these questions into sharp focus. Drawing from a wide range of literature on the subject, but especially from Schon and Dewey (stimulating quotes from both are liberally sprinkled throughout the book!), it provides a series of textured responses to these questions.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which is appropriately cross-referenced with the others. Each section could very well be read by

itself to begin with, but arouses curiosity to delve into all the other sections. The first section provides a detailed background: it unfolds a well-researched account of the many-layered nature of 'reflection' in a teacher's practice, as well as the meaning, purpose and process of 'action-research'. Action research is described as a step-by-step process in which the teacher: 1) identifies a significant problem to which she is seeking a solution; 2) analyzes the problem; 3) comes up with alternative strategies to address the problem; 4) identifies the most promising strategy; 5) implements the strategy; 6) reviews the effectiveness of the strategy; and 7) further refines her approach to the problem. This could then lead to a further cycle of research, in which the teacher's reflections may lead her to question her own initial assumptions and framing of the problem.

This first section also introduces the reader to the setting of an extended study, where the author and her team facilitated a process by which a group of eight teachers conducted action research into a wide range of issues in their respective classrooms at a school run by the Azim Premji Foundation near Dehradun, Uttarakhand. These teachers ranged from being 'very experienced', to 'moderately experienced' to relatively 'new to teaching'; they taught a range of subjects in primary classes: languages, mathematics, science and environmental studies; and all had volunteered to participate, albeit for somewhat different reasons, in the process of conducting action research. The facilitators introduced them to the stages of action research, helped them identify the problems they were most concerned about, provided occasional guidance in addressing these problems, and supported them when needed in documenting their experiences. The major thesis of the book is that by learning to conduct systematic action research into problems that they themselves identify as being significant, teachers can indeed become more reflective in their practice.

The second section documents the narratives of each of the teachers who volunteered to take part in the study. It paints a 'working portrait' of each of the teachers and his/her concerns, and gives an account of the problems or issues they tried to address through action research, as well as their learnings from this effort. Here is a sampler of the action research problems that the teachers had identified:

- How to increase vocabulary and reading abilities in English for students of class 4?
- How does one teach children of class 6 'how we see' and help them overcome misconceptions about 'sight'?

- How to inculcate scientific temper in class 5 and 6 students?
- How to ensure an understanding of place value among a few children who did not have this concept even in class 6?
- How to teach environmental studies topics to a few students who did not have a background in Hindi, the language of instruction?

Through a process that was made more systematic (than they would have otherwise adopted on their own), all the teachers, to varying degrees, enlarged their repertoire of teaching methods, experienced shifts in their perceptions of children and their learning process, and were able to find a way forward in addressing the problems they had identified at the beginning. Many were very gratified by what they saw as higher levels of enthusiasm and engagement in their students. The teachers' own voices come through clearly in this section, as we get glimpses into their thought processes and journeys. We also hear the voices, albeit much more mutedly, of the facilitators who accompanied them.

The third section is intended to be evaluative and summarizing, including reflections on the 'reflection-in-action' as it was experienced in diverse ways by the teachers. It analyses the data presented in the previous section, examining the ways in which reflection might have been engendered in each of the teachers through the process of action research, and whether this had brought about shifts in the teacher's practice, and his/her understanding of children and learning. It notes that there are indeed multiple shifts that several teachers experienced, from, simply, a widening of their teaching strategies and repertoire, to deeper changes in their appreciation of children's capacities, their understanding of what is involved in, say, 'reading with meaning' or 'probing scientific questions', as well as their own purposes in teaching. In its concluding 'overview', while critically reviewing the shortcomings of the facilitation process and the study itself, this section underscores the efficacy of action research as a means of making for reflective practice in a teacher. The appendices provide some helpful tools and templates for those readers who might wish to embark on a similar journey. There is a very useful list of references provided.

Alongside the book, there is also a set of two DVDs available (which can be procured from the Azim Premji Foundation), that video-document some key features of the action research process. The DVDs include a culminating interview with each of the teachers who took part in the study. We are thus able to view and listen to each of the teachers speaking about their work, the

subjects they teach, their concerns for their students, the things they tried, what worked, what further remains to be done, as well as their challenges and learning from the action research process.

I see this book and the DVDs as an extremely valuable resource for all those who work in education and with schools, and especially for teacher educators. It could also be considered as essential reading for school administrators as well as thinking teachers interested in deepening their understanding and practice of teaching and learning. The book and the DVD both provide in-depth depictions of shifts that have taken place in real 'flesh and blood' teachers. These are teachers who have themselves had a very ordinary school education, and yet are becoming committed to their students and their genuine learning needs. It is evident that prior exposure to workshops with resource persons from Azim Premji Foundation had already whetted the appetite of some for doing things 'differently' from their own traditional schooling. But it is the process of participating in an institutional setting with a larger community of enquirers, many of whom were involved in the action research that generated a culture of discussion, documentation and reflection, which led over a period of time to actual movements in their practice.

The teachers who were already somewhat discontented with traditional approaches to teaching, are seen as being able to visualize novel strategies that enable their students to become active and fearless participants in the learning process. Even teachers who had hitherto been somewhat mechanical in their approach, begin to come alive to their students' capacity for learning and their overall well-being. Their concerns for specific children and the need to closely diagnose and respond to their individual situations come to the fore for some others. This is highly encouraging of the power of 'action research' in bringing about new initiatives and altered pedagogies in the classroom. There are deeper changes in habitual thought patterns, outlooks and approaches to education that are also indicated in some cases. The linking thread in all these accounts are processes of 'reflection' that we can sense these teachers having experienced during the journeys they have embarked upon.

If one were now to step back to reflect on the rich body of work and thesis that comprises this book, a few questions arise in the mind:

- What assumptions or view of human beings, of children, as well as of teachers as thinking-feeling beings, do the theorists and thinkers represented in the book appear to reflect?

- What aims of education does the overall frame of the book presuppose?
- Are there levels and forms of reflective inquiry that teachers might engage in, which are not within the scope of the form of ‘action research’ that the book proposes?
- What is the relationship between ‘reflection’, ‘attention’, ‘awareness’ and ‘observation’, and how might one complement or enrich the other?

I briefly explore this last question in the light of articles appearing elsewhere in this *Journal*, especially the very first article, titled *Attention and the Traffic of Thought*. In this article, speaking of ‘the quality of attention’, there is an arresting statement: “A moment of suspension is required, which is not merely the pause of *reflection*, necessary as this may be in its own time and place [emphasis mine].” And a little further on: “It is also applicable in daily life. By constant *attention* [emphasis mine] to our thoughts, feelings and behaviour, we create more and more the climate of change; we create for ourselves the opportunity to delve deeper and wider into ourselves.”

Connecting this with the preceding discussion on the subject of the book, it would seem that ‘reflection’ and ‘attention’ are both human capabilities that can operate powerfully in our daily lives. The first, reflection, requires a pause in activity, and a ‘bending or looking back’ (in its etymological meaning) to our thoughts and actions, evaluating them against particular ends-in-view. It is a movement in a continuum of deliberate ‘looking’—at *past* thought or action and its effects, through *present* thinking, with some *future* state of affairs imaginatively in mind. With ‘reflection’ we actively check ourselves and our actions, and remain open to the possibility of re-directing our available energies, re-setting our goals, and at times even re-framing the perspective which informs these. As human beings and teachers we certainly need to do this time and again, when we commit ourselves to meeting the needs of students as well as educational aims as we perceive them.

‘Attention’ involves ‘waiting’ and ‘stretching’ (again, in its etymological meanings). It is a stretching towards whatever there is ‘present’ in the surround. It involves a suspension of the deliberative thought-process, allowing ‘awareness’ and a clarifying ‘observation’ to reveal the surround, both the outer and the inner. Subtle patterns, features and shades of a whole situation, including one’s thinking and feeling—not apparent to the habitual or even the reflective mind—may come to be sensed. The space that opens within deepens the reach of the mind, dissolving that which is habitual,

releasing new energy. This may happen when one is alone or with nature, in conversation with another or even in a classroom with a group of students. In this movement, which is a non-movement of active thinking, lies the possibility of renewal, of affectionate comprehension of a situation, of new responses that are drawn forth, of change that is qualitatively significant, and which brings its own atmosphere of learning. This is perhaps the foundation of what Stephen Smith calls the 'attention curriculum'. This, however, cannot be a pre-set course to be run (in the etymological meaning of 'curriculum') by teacher or student; but a living engagement with moments that present themselves, into which may flow an energy capable of fully responding to the complexity of situations as they arise. Surely, this too is the need of the hour in education, teaching and learning.

In the end one is grateful that Schon's pioneering work has been brought to us, especially in the Indian context, in such a textured and concrete form by Neeraja Raghavan, for the value of 'reflective teaching' in our schools can never be minimized. As a summation, I see that 'reflective practice' can be a powerful means of moving towards more or less known ends in a given framework and context, when limiting assumptions and habitual thoughts and actions are uncovered and creatively transcended. This is demonstrated by many of the teachers who are the subject of this book. On the other hand, 'attentive practice' might be the quality of being fully present that allows for transcendence of any pre-set framework and context, and reveals as well as releases that which was hitherto *unknown*. Thus we cannot *know* as much about 'attention' and its operations as we do about 'reflection', except in stretching towards it again and again. In my mind's eye they remain distinctive, and complementary, facilities of the human mind.

And yet, just as Schon's work has provided a clear step forward in our understanding of the richness of teaching-learning through 'reflection' in multiple domains, could one not look ahead to a further revolution in our understanding of teaching-learning through 'attention' that Krishnamurti spoke about during his lifetime? (See the Krishnamurti passage at the beginning of this *Journal*). Perhaps the 'attentive and aware teacher' will then take her rightful place alongside the 'reflective teacher'.

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