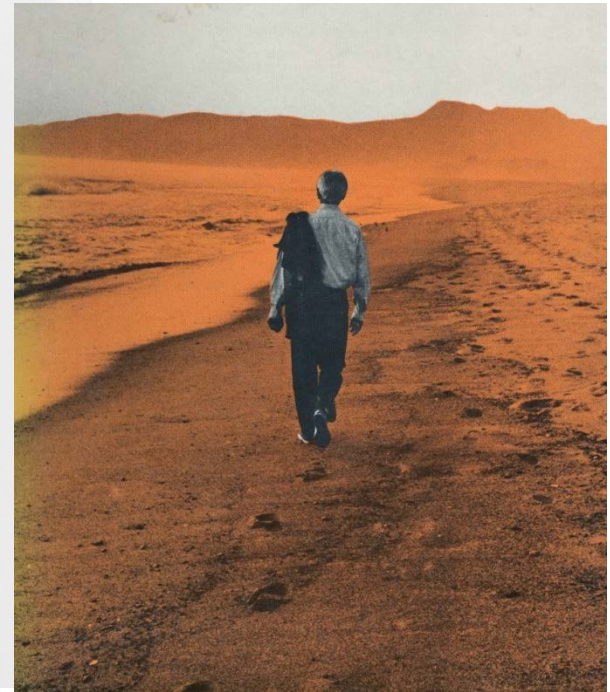


Krishnamurti and Truth



“Truth is a pathless land”

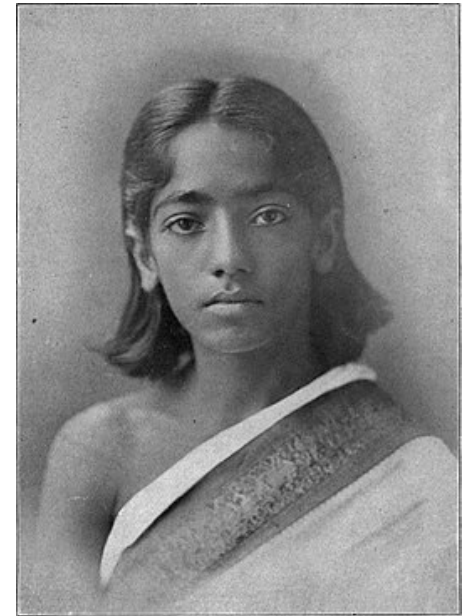
The core message of Vedanta with its many yogas is that there are innumerable paths to Truth and that each individual may choose the path to suit their temperament. By contrast, Krishnamurti wrote that “Truth is a pathless land and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect ... Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized, nor should any organization be formed to lead or coerce people along a particular path.” (Luytens, 293)

There is much to unpack in this deep utterance. It resonates loudly with the essential message of the Buddha who advocated each person to think for themselves, develop reason, and not to accept authority or tradition. Rather, think it all out and if it is beneficial to one and all, accept it and then carry it out in practice. Buddha would say, “Be a light unto yourself.”

Krishnamurti’s strange life’s journey led him to this profound conviction and it is instructive to trace the trajectory of his mental evolution. His childhood and upbringing contributed greatly to his core message. We will highlight these events in the narration below with a view to understanding his essential philosophy.

Childhood

Jiddu Krishnamurti was born in 1895 in Madanepalli, Andhra Pradesh. He was the eighth of eleven children, and being the eighth was named Krishna because according to Indian mythology, Sri Krishna was also the eighth child of Devaki and Vasudeva. When he was ten, Krishnamurti's mother passed away and his father moved to Madras (now Chennai) for employment where he found work in the Theosophical Society in Adyar, a suburb of Madras.



Theosophy

Theosophy is a mystical religion that tries to combine theology and philosophy. Its central teaching is that there is a spiritual hierarchy and that humanity is evolving according to this hierarchy. It was founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky, a Russian woman who dabbled in the occult. The 19th century being marked by the ascendancy of science and the decline of traditional religions, the movement found a fertile home in Europe, America and of course, India. With its occult and mystical overtones, the international religious cult established the Theosophical Society in Madras, with Annie Besant as their leader. Central to her message was that new messiah “world teacher” would soon appear on the planet and so the congregation was fixated on finding one.

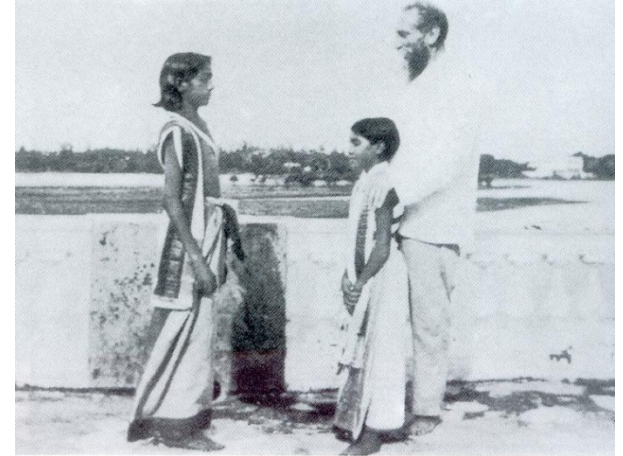


Annie Besant



Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933) was a product of Victorian England. After a failed marriage with an Anglican minister, she became an atheist and began editing a journal advocating woman's rights, especially with respect to birth control. She was embroiled in legal battles with her ex-husband for the custody of her two children. In such a confused mental milieu, she was asked to review the theosophical work titled 'The Secret Doctrine' of Helena Blavatsky. She was immediately converted to this line of thought and corresponded with Blavatsky, ultimately taking over leadership of the Theosophical Society. With this renewed missionary zeal, she moved to India and led the society from Madras. While in India, she supported India's independence movement and was on good terms with many of the leaders of the movement, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. But much of her work in India was centered on expanding theosophy.

Krishnamurti and Leadbeater



In 1909, an assistant to Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, seeing young Krishna and his brother Nitya playing on the seashore reported back that they had “extraordinary spiritual auras.” Krishnamurti later recalled, “When I first went over to his room I was much afraid for most Indian boys are afraid of Europeans. I do not know why it is that such fear is created, but apart from the difference in color which is no doubt one of the causes, there was, when I was a boy, much political agitation and our imaginations were much that the Europeans in India are by no means generally kind to us and I used to see many acts of cruelty which made me still more bitter. It was a surprise to us, therefore, to find how different was the Englishman who was also a Theosophist.” (Luytens, 23)

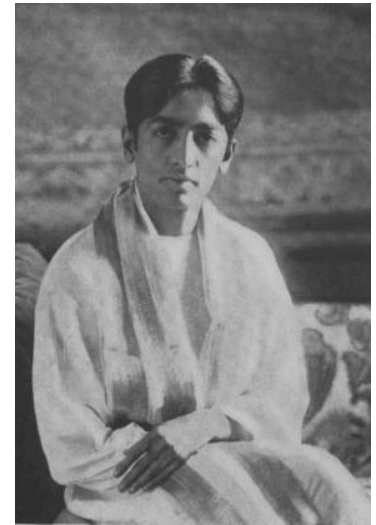
Annie Besant adopts Krishna & Nitya

Leadbeater and Annie Besant convinced Krishna's father to hand over the custody of his two sons. "They will be well taken care and educated and then sent to England for higher studies," they told him. After the death of his wife and his brood of children under his solitary care, the father was only too happy to comply especially with a promise of a foreign education for his two children, a dream of many Indians under colonial rule. Krishnamurti was fourteen and Nitya eleven when Annie Besant took over as their guardian. The two boys were quickly showered with gifts, from books to bicycles, and it was not long before they called Annie Besant their mother and she reciprocated. "Will you let me call you mother when I write to you?" Krishnamurti wrote in a letter to her later that year. "I have no other mother now to love, and I feel as if you were our mother because you have been so kind to us. We both thank you so much for taking us away from home." (Luytens, 32)



Annie Besant as private tutor

At first, Annie Besant was their private tutor. Regarding her instruction, Krishnamurti recorded later, "Our mother gave us an hour's reading lesson every morning. We read together Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, and I enjoyed very much, *Captain Courageous*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* ... and some Shakespeare plays," (Luytens, 44)



Higher education



What this reveals is another side of colonial rule. Undoubtedly, there were the imperialist rulers such as the Viceroy and General Dyer who had a militant attitude to the native population. Then there were others like Annie Besant who had a more “missionary” attitude to “civilise” the natives. These were the two extremes of colonial rule. There is no doubt however that Annie Besant did regard both Nitya and Krishna as her children, but her guardianship was under the Theosophical optic of grooming the “new messiah.”

In 1911, she took them both to England for higher studies. The frail Nitya had trouble adjusting to the new environment and was plagued with recurring health problems. Though Mrs. Besant had some difficulty in enrolling both of them in Oxford because Oxford would not admit Indians or any colored people, she used her influence in getting them in.

‘The Coming of the World Teacher’

While in England, Annie Besant continued her work promoting theosophy. She gave a lecture titled ‘The Coming of the World Teacher’ at Queen’s Hall in London. She seemed to have oratorical magnetism. The hall was full and it was standing room only. Perhaps not knowing that he is the ‘world teacher’ referred to in her talk, Krishnamurti later wrote, “She is indeed the finest speaker in the world.” (Luytens, 56)

The Order of the Star

It is helpful to understand these developments against the background of global events. The First World War was ravaging Europe and people everywhere may have been unconsciously expecting the “messiah” to save them. Thus the climate was ideal for her message. So when she created ‘The Order of the Star’ and was grooming Krishnamurti to be the leader, it was natural that this would attract that segment of educated society who were disillusioned with the atheism of science and the puritanical authoritarianism of the Church in the Victorian era. The attraction to theosophy was psychological and romantic with its overtones of the mystical east.

Meanwhile, back in India, Krishna’s father filed a lawsuit against Annie Besant charging that she abducted his two children so she returned to India to deal with the legal case. Krishnamurti and Nitya continued their studies in England and sat for the matriculation examination in January 1918. Nitya passed with honours but Krishnamurti failed. It seems that his weakest subject was mathematics. (Luytens, 110) So later that year, in September, Krishnamurti sat for the matriculation examination for the second time and failed again. However, he continued to attend lectures in London University. During this time, he wrote frequently to Annie Besant, always addressing her as “dearest mother” and calling her “amma” the Telugu word for ‘mother.’

Annie Besant and India

For her part, Mrs. Besant reciprocated and there was genuine empathy towards Krishna and Nitya. Apart from her legal troubles, she also supported the Gandhian movement for independence and during one of her acts of civil disobedience, was arrested and imprisoned for three months in 1917. She earned the respect and admiration of Gandhi and others that she was elected as the president of the Congress Party. During this time, she also founded a college, promoting education for both men and women and this college later became what is now called Benares Hindu University.



The move to Ojai, California

Apart from her humanitarian works and supporting the cause of Indian independence, she was hoping that Krishnamurti would soon take up his role as the “new messiah.” However, events were not unfolding as she had envisioned them.

Nitya’s health was fragile and Krishnamurti too was getting repeatedly sick while in England. So Annie Besant moved them to a warmer climate where the society had a cottage in Ojai, California, eighty miles north of Los Angeles. There, the two boys could recover and resume their studies in salubrious serenity.



“The process”

It was in Ojai that Krishnamurti had his life changing experience on the 17th of August, 1922. It lasted three days and began with an intense pain at the back of his neck. The pain swelled. He then lapsed into unconsciousness. What this was no one can say, but Krishnamurti called it ‘the process.’ Of this event, Krishnamurti later wrote, “I was supremely happy, for I had seen. Nothing would ever be the same. I have drunk at the clear and pure waters and my thirst was appeased. ... I have seen the Light. I have touched compassion which heals all sorrow and suffering; it is not for myself but the world. ... Love in all its glory has intoxicated my heart; and my heart can never be closed. I have drunk at the fountain of Joy and eternal beauty. I am God-intoxicated.” (Luytens, 171-172)

The “pain in the neck” and death of Nitya

It is unclear exactly what this ‘pain in the neck’ experience was and its relation to his ecstatic experience. Perhaps this was a psychosomatic response to the fact that he knew by then that he was being groomed to be the ‘new messiah’. It is difficult to say. What is clear is that it changed his perspective and sadly ‘the process’ would recur sporadically throughout his life, though perhaps in his later life, it was somewhat diminished.

Many in the Theosophical Society viewed this experience as a turning point and an indication that the ‘messiah’ had arrived. Krishnamurti took up his role in the Order of the Star and began lecturing on theosophy in America, Europe and India. Annie Besant travelled from India and met both Nitya and Krishnamurti in England in June 1924. Perhaps she felt a sense of fulfilment by these events. Unfortunately, Nitya’s health was too fragile by these travels that he had to return to Ojai to recuperate. In November 1925, Nitya died at the age of 25. Krishnamurti received this news while he was en route by ship to India.

Krishnamurti's reaction to Nitya's death

Two other Indian members of the Theosophical Society were with Krishnamurti on this voyage and they recorded his emotional reaction. The news "broke him completely; it did more - his entire philosophy of life - the implicit faith in the future as outlined by Mrs. Besant and Mr. Leadbeater, Nitya's vital part in it, all appeared shattered at that moment." His sadness lasted ten days. "At night he would sob and moan and cry out for Nitya, sometimes in his native Telugu which in his waking consciousness he could not speak. Day after day we watched him heart-broken disillusioned. Day after day he seemed to change, gripping himself together in an effort to face life - but without Nitya. He was going through an inner revolution, finding new strength." (Luytens, 238)

Truth and the devil

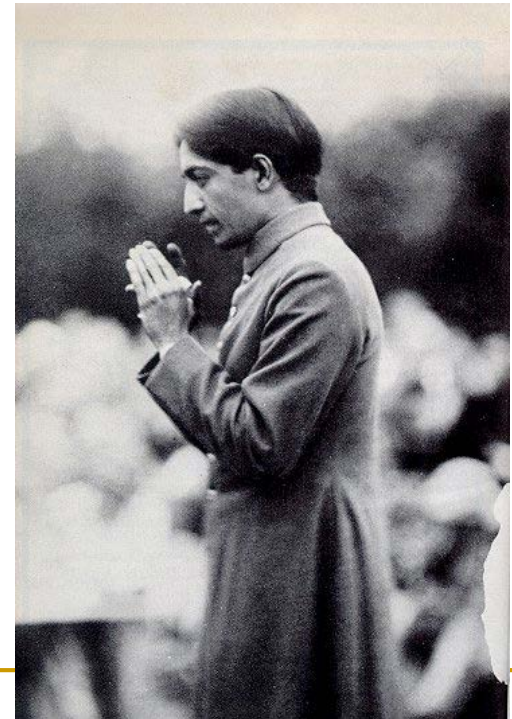
Krishnamurti's message in his theosophical lectures was slowly changing. He advocated everyone to think for themselves and was steering away from theosophical doctrine. This created a schism in the order. There were some who agreed with him and others who were opposed. These developments reached a climax on August 3, 1929. That day, in front of Annie Besant and a crowd of thousands along with a world-wide radio audience, he said, "You may remember the story of how the devil and a friend of his were walking down the street, when they saw ahead of them a man stoop down and pick up something from the ground, look at it, and put it away in his pocket. The friend said to the devil, "What did that man pick up?" "He picked up a piece of the truth," said the devil. "That is a very bad business for you, then," said his friend. "Oh, not at all," the devil replied. "I am going to help him organize it." I maintain that truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. That is my point of view, and I adhere to that absolutely and unconditionally. Truth being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized, nor should any organization be formed to lead or coerce people along a particular path." (Luytens, 293)

An act of courage

This was a defiant act of courage and Krishnamurti must have pondered over it deeply. His thoughts were veering in this direction ever since Nitya's death and perhaps all the prophecies were shattered. It was difficult for him to do given his love for Mrs. Annie Besant who was more than a foster mother for him. Yet he continued. "This is no magnificent deed, because I do not want followers, and I mean this. The moment you follow someone you cease to follow Truth. I am not concerned whether you pay attention to what I say or not. I want to do a certain thing in the world and I am going to do it with unwavering concentration. I am concerning myself with only one essential thing: to set man free. I desire to free him from all cages, from all fears, and not to found religions, new sects, not to establish new theories and new philosophies." (Luytens, 294)

The world teacher had arrived

The World Teacher had arrived. Yet the congregation was disgruntled. A leading member of the society, Lady Emily Luytens wrote, "How strange it seems that for seventeen years we have been expecting the World Teacher, and now when He speaks of what is beyond all forms, we are hurt or angry. He is making us do our own work, mentally and emotionally, and that is the last thing we expected." (Luytens, 283)



The aristocratic sage

However, it is paradoxical that Krishnamurti had followers and helpers in his message. Moreover, part of the infrastructure of the Theosophical Society still supported his world travels. Everywhere he went, he was the aristocratic sage for who were his listeners? They were often the educated elite whether in Europe, America or India.



Krishnamurti and education

For the next fifty odd years, Krishnamurti lectured incessantly and established schools. Much like Tagore who hated his childhood indoctrinal education, Krishnamurti too shuddered at the very thought of such schooling. So he established various new schools where children would be encouraged to think for themselves and explore the world for themselves.

For Krishnamurti, there is no “state of enlightenment.” Rather, “there is only the journey. There is no total knowing of oneself but rather an unending process of knowing oneself.” (Jayakar, 82) “Truth is Life,” he would say. Truth is where you are. The human being is in microcosm the whole of humanity, not as an abstract idea, but an actual fact. But each one must discover this for himself or herself. “When the mind is utterly still, that which is sacred takes place.”

Conversation with Nehru



In a conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru, Krishnamurti said, "Understanding of the self only arises in relationship, in watching yourself in relationship to people, ideas, and things; to trees, the earth, and the world around you and within you. Relationship is the mirror in which the self is revealed. Without self-knowledge there is no basis for right thought and action." When Nehru asked, "How does one start?", Krishnamurti replied, "Begin where you are. Read every word, every phrase, every paragraph of the mind, as it operates through thought." (Jayakar, 142)

Reflective thinking

This is the process of reflective thinking. Through this process, we transcend thought, and we transcend the mind. The problem with the human being is that we want others to do the thinking for us and thus we become prisoners of dogma. This creates division and thus is the source of all conflicts, says Krishnamurti.

The essential message of Krishnamurti is to reject authority and to think for oneself. This message of cultivating your own abilities of critical thinking is as old as the Buddha who taught several millenia ago, "Believe not because some old manuscripts are produced, believe not because it is your national belief, because you have been made to believe it from your childhood, but reason it all out, and after you have analysed it, then, if you find that it will do good to one and all, believe it, live up to it and help others to live up to it." (Murty, 103)

Kant on Enlightenment

Immanuel Kant in his 1784 essay on 'What is Enlightenment?' wrote that "laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind ... remains under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. ... If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, etc., I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay ... others will undertake the work for me." (Kant, 83) Krishnamurti's message is the same. However, it is easy to infer from this a rejection of everything and surely that is not what is implied. What is meant here is that we should use our judgement and not let demagogues run our life which is sadly the case with the rise of populisms everywhere.



To change the world one must change oneself

To try to bring order by political means, or by economic means, or by social change, is futile according to Krishnamurti. The individual consciousness is not different from the consciousness of humanity. The interconnectedness of life then implies that if I can bring about the change within myself and put an end to sorrow, that change will touch the rest of humanity. This resonates with Gandhi's message that one must be the change that one wants to see. The change must come from within.

The brain and its ability

In one of his last talks, he said, "The brain is extraordinarily capable, has infinite capacity, but we have made it so small and petty. ... So when there is that space and emptiness and therefore immense energy - energy is passion, love and compassion and intelligence - then there is that truth which is most holy, most sacred, that which man has sought from time immemorial. That truth doesn't lie in any temple, in any mosque, in any church. And it has no path to it except through one's own understanding of oneself, inquiring, studying, learning. Then there is that which is eternal. (Krishnamurti, Talks, Washington D.C., 1985, p. 50)

The essential message of Krishnamurti

Krishnamurti's message does not clash with the essential message of Vedanta. All systems, all philosophies, all disciplines are approximations of Truth and not Truth itself. *Veda aveda bhavati*, which means the Veda becomes Aveda, that is useless, for the enlightened being. That can come about only if we find infinity within ourselves.

So for more than fifty years, Krishnamurti lectured moving from continent to continent spreading the message of independent thinking and stressing the need not to imprison oneself in doctrine and dogma. He conversed with many learned academics and these are all recorded and documented and make for a fascinating study. At the age of 90, he died of pancreatic cancer in Ojai, California.

