



# Enabling spaces: does it really matter? A dialogue between two friends

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Two friends, one of them a school teacher (T), are meeting after a long time. They soon begin talking and education becomes the topic of their discussion.

F: Your school is really beautiful and the children here seem very happy and friendly. But, tell me something. I see that tremendous energy goes into creating and running these schools. Does education really need special conditions?

T: I guess there are two questions here. What is the goal of education, and how does the school environment impact children?

F: But wait a minute. School environment doesn't seem so important. We know that children can learn under all kinds of circumstances, for instance in war-torn regions, in abject poverty, in conditions of hostility and domestic violence. So why all this fuss about enabling spaces? Does it really matter?

T: Would you voluntarily want your child to grow up under such hostile conditions?

F: Of course not! But in spite of going through conventional education we turned out fine didn't we?

T: I don't know about you – but I don't think I am fine!

F: What do you mean? We are fine! We are successful members of society and good people...

T: Yes! We are moderately successful and functional – but look both at society at large



and the individual in particular. I don't think that society is healthy, or that the individual is truly happy.

F: Society has many issues, but how can we as individuals fix them? Also, what has this got to do with education?

T: Before we try to fix society, shall we look at what makes society the way it is? Then perhaps we can see the connection between education and society, at least the way I see the link.

F: Boy! That is a question for sociologists, economists and philosophers –not for you and me! But if I were to speculate, I'd say the system is very corrupt, there is a nexus between the very wealthy and the politicians, there is poor governance and perhaps a million other factors we are not aware of or cannot comprehend. I have been told that it is impossible to separate the individual from his society.

T: Okay, I agree it's a very complex issue and I am definitely not competent to talk about sociology or economics. But can we focus on the human element? Why are we corrupt, exploitative and insensitive?

F: Maybe that is just part of human nature.

T: What do you mean by human nature?

F: Human beings are part of the animal kingdom, and there we see territoriality, the need to protect oneself and one's young, even in primate tribes, violence and dominance. So all that is part of our nature too...

T: But human beings can be kind, altruistic and compassionate too! And I've heard these qualities attributed to animals also. Anyway humans have this amazing capacity to learn, wouldn't you agree? Then we must ask whether education can have an impact on the individual and society.

F: Obviously it does! Education is meant to help children earn livelihoods and in that sense it does impact both the individual and society.

T: Sure, but can I share with you some insights about education by Krishnamurti? I've just been reading these books<sup>1</sup>.

"The meaning of that word 'school' means leisure, leisure in which to learn; and a place where students and the teachers can flower, and a place where a future generation can be prepared, because schools are meant for that, not just merely to turn out human beings as mechanical, technological instruments, merely jobs and careers and so on - which is necessary - but also flower as human beings, without fear, without confusion, with great integrity. And to bring about such a good human being - I am using the word good in its proper sense, not in the respectable sense, good in the sense of a whole human being, not fragmented, not broken up, not confused."

"Surely a school is a place where one learns about the totality, the wholeness of life ... It is a place where both the teacher and the taught explore not only the outer world, the world of knowledge, but also their own thinking, their own behaviour. From this they begin to discover their own conditioning and how it distorts their thinking. This conditioning is the self to which such tremendous and cruel importance is given. Freedom from conditioning and misery begins with this awareness. It is only in such freedom that true learning can take place."

F: That seems a bit daunting and overwhelming. Can education really take on such a big challenge? What kind of environment will you create if you agree with Krishnamurti about the purpose of education?

T: Well, it may sound daunting, but when I look around at the state of the world, I don't see any other way to educate! Let me tell you what my colleagues and I feel is demanded for such an education. First and foremost, the relationship between teacher and student must be based on mutual trust and affection, and not on authority and fear. If student and teacher together have to explore the nature of the human psyche, it's not going to happen when they fear and mistrust each other!

F: You are right, I remember how scared we were of our teachers. We never did feel a sense of connect, except with a few teachers who seemed kind and friendly. I have a question, though. Even in the best of relationships, being the adult and the one responsible for the child, don't you have to admonish them sometimes? Don't you have to lay down norms and raise your voice if they are being harmful to each other? Don't tell me they're never afraid of you!

T: That is a very good point, and we're not claiming to have eliminated all fear. However,

<sup>1</sup> Beginnings of Learning and  
The Whole Movement Of Life Is Learning,  
by J. Krishnamurti

it is a very different ballgame when you use fear systematically. Or when fear becomes the main currency of transaction between teacher and student. Some years ago a few teachers did a survey of children's fears across various schools in India. I remember reading some of



their responses: 'homework, tests and dangerous animals, 'the dark, math teachers and the deep parts of the swimming pool, ' 'natural disasters, Dad, teachers and tests' and 'God, snakes, some teachers'<sup>2</sup>.

F: Hmm...I see your point that in conventional education fear seems to be the main force for motivating children to learn. Also, coming to think about it, schools generally use a lot of competition, comparison, reward and punishment. Are you saying that these are detrimental to learning?.

T: Yes! It seriously impairs learning and, more importantly, produces a brutal society. The interesting thing is that even scientific research has shown unambiguously that fear compromises academic learning and that competition, reward and punishment may produce short-term gains, but in the long run creates insensitive and insecure human beings.

F: I am beginning to see the link that you are making between society and education, but so far we seem to have approached it from the

point of view of the negative effects of conventional education. Tell me something about the tangible outcomes of your approach.

T: First, a disclaimer. The more you work in the field of education, it seems the less you can theorise or guarantee results! However, from our working with children for the last 23 years we can say some things with confidence.

F: For example?

T: It is possible to teach without resorting to exams and all the other tricks that are used! In fact, because from day one students are encouraged to think, to question and make sure they understand concepts, we feel that their grasp is deep and their capacity to learn new material is enhanced. And it goes beyond learning in the usual sense. The minute we have made understanding central to our engagement with students, many subtle but significant things begin to happen, even in daily interactions. Everything that happens is addressed from the point of view of understanding, even when a child breaks a rule...

F: Don't you still face the challenge of motivation and resistance on a daily basis? Also children anyway will compare amongst themselves, even if your environment doesn't encourage it. How do you address these highly conditioned forces?

T: You've hit the nail on the head! I mean, like I said, it is actually quite possible to meet the narrower goals of education – mastering skills and concepts - without subjecting children and teachers to all the humiliation that regular schooling seems to do. But the minute you widen the canvas, you face the tremendous challenge of human conditioning. By this I mean that in our relating to each other we will

<sup>2</sup> See Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools, Vol 15, 2011

encounter our prejudices, fears and anxieties, hopes and desires, joys and sorrows, the need to compare and our particular ways of thinking and acting.

F: So how do you meet this challenge?

T: Hopefully with humility! What we hope to do is to create an environment where we can become aware of our own conditioning, the forces of identity and division, belief and insecurity, and how these might play out in the larger society. Again, it's only through self understanding that change can happen.

F: What if the students are not interested in learning about themselves?

T: You can't force or coerce them, that's for sure! I think we can only invite students to learn about themselves...and in order to do this the structure of the school is designed to enable reflection and questioning. We are a community of learners with a strong emphasis on cooperation and working together. This naturally forces us to look at ourselves in the 'mirror of relationship'. We also learn about how people all over the world, under different circumstances, meet life. Then we spend a lot of time close to nature, and we have made spaces in the day for quiet reflection. One of the hardest thing students find is the half-hour of 'quiet time' everyday. And the fact that it's so difficult is quite revealing! It seems that the minute we are not occupied with any particular task or entertainment, then we become aware of a restlessness in ourselves.

F: But the student may be processing these experiences in a very different way, for example, they may interpret your 'quiet time' as a time for planning or daydreaming. How do you ensure they are really exploring the questions that animate your school?

T: You really have a knack for asking difficult questions! Yes, each of us will interpret things in our own way. We put care and energy into talking with our students. On average senior students for example spend 3 hours a week in so called dialogue sessions. They may also have informal chats with adults. The topics range from norms of the school, to understanding their own interrelationships, and their place in the world. In all these we hope to see if together we can really pay attention to all the movements of thought and emotion that are happening to us from moment to moment. It is really demanding and believe me, we are all beginners in this journey.

F: So I guess what you're saying is (though there are no guarantees here!) you are hoping to nurture compassionate human beings, free from the constraints we all unquestioningly inherit...



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