



Is enquiry for the privileged?

"Man has throughout the ages been seeking something beyond himself, beyond material welfare – something we call truth or God or reality, a timeless state – something that cannot be disturbed by circumstances, by thought or by human corruption."

–J Krishnamurti

"Everything requires attention, really. If we ran machines without paying attention to them, they would break down. Our thought, too, is a process, and it requires attention, otherwise, it's going to go wrong." –David Bohm

The problem, stated or implicit, usually takes this form: There is tremendous, immediate suffering in the world right now, both in the human and the non-human world. There

are things that need to be done in the world to improve it, to alleviate this suffering. Social systems and laws– to do with gender, caste, class, environment– need to be changed. Likewise, technologies and economies need to change, in the face of global warming. There is a need for direct action in these realms. What's more, if people had not worked tirelessly for change over decades, no improvements would ever have happened. We currently actively benefit from these changes, from the hard work of our predecessors. Our energies therefore need to go into working for further positive change, structurally speaking. Krishnamurti's insistence that we understand the nature of the self, that we pay attention to the self "to which such tremendous and cruel importance is given," that we understand deeply that this self is the source of the personal and social violence that we as a species



experience— this insistence on enquiry is only for some of us. Only those of us with full bellies and safe homes can indulge in such an enquiry. The privileged cut ourselves off from real problems and dedicate ourselves to what is, essentially, navel gazing. In brief, “enquiry” is for the privileged.

To give some context, we hear the above formulation from those of us who (paradoxically) already lead rather privileged lives, and also from those of us who are investigating marginality, who are not satisfied with enquiry as a “solution.” Some responses to the above perceptions follow, not in order to build a counter-argument (what counter can be made to the statement that the world needs to be a better place and that we need to devote our energies to making it a better place?), but to wonder about the nature of our predicament and to question our perceptions and our ready-made solutions. Though criticisms can be sharply formulated, responses, if sharply formulated, tend to fall into an argumentative framework of attack and defence which doesn’t really help understanding.

We can conceive of *enquiry*, tentatively, in two ways. In one “way,” enquiry is a recognition that the thought-and-emotion-based “reality” that most humans experience on a day to day basis is painfully limited; indeed, it is just a distorted picture. “Reality” (or whatever inadequate word we choose in this context) cannot be captured by thought-emotion, as Krishnamurti often insisted. *Enquiry* is the understanding, through attention, that this distorted thought-created reality is painfully limited and divisive. The other (totally interconnected, related) sense of the word *enquiry* is not quite so metaphysical: enquiry is a recognition that humans suffer deeply and create deep suffering for others, human and non-

human. The root of suffering is massive self-centredness. The intent of enquiry, therefore, is to dissolve this seed of self-centredness in each one of us through self-awareness, attention, in some form (there are many subtleties to explore in this formulation, but let it stand for now).

Put another way: Enquiry is a process of questioning the armour of the self, as this armour is the seed of the entire problem of human life on this planet. Krishnamurti would suggest that this is not an “outward” questioning (of social structure) but an “inward” one—(though of course what is truly outside and what is truly inside? Many mystics will say, “you” are in the world and equally the world is in “you”).

Is the process of “inward” questioning reserved only for the privileged? Isn’t it the height of privilege to say that? It is rather like saying, only the privileged can think rationally. Or, only the privileged can be empathetic to others in their lives, or understand something deeply in their worlds.

The self that desires fulfilment, wants security, pursues pleasure and avoids pain, binds itself to divisive social identities— how shall we consider this entity which is the basis of the global culture and society humans have created? Is paying attention to it, with the “intent” of ending its activity, a luxury for the privileged?

Perhaps some of us who are privileged will answer immediately, *yes*. Awareness of self is a luxury which those with time and resources at hand can indulge in.

There is surely something condescending in this quick response, however. It negates those through the ages, through human history and culture, from vastly different socio-economic backgrounds, who have felt and communicated passionately about the reality they have experienced that is

not the product of identity, thinking, division and entrenchment. From concentration camps, from war zones, in prison cells, in slums, from lower caste and class backgrounds—potters, teachers, weavers, fisherfolk, writers, contemplatives—these individuals seem to speak to us from a real ground of love, compassion and non-division. Krishnamurti alludes to this sense of the *real* in the quotation with which I have begun this piece; he is a contemporary voice expressing an insight that is essentially timeless.

Funnily, when I (the privileged) am indulging in a variety of activities, the privileged nature of these activities seldom troubles me. I can acquire property, pursue cultural refinement, enhance my job prospects, secure my children's future, in other words build the social self through cultural capital to all the extent I can, without necessarily applying the question *Is this privilege?* to any of these pursuits. Or even if I apply the question, I seldom seem able to withdraw consciously from the self-enhancing activity itself. Suddenly, however, the act of paying attention as a genuine way of conducting personal and social life arouses all my doubts and suspicions about this "attention" being a privileged act. This is surely a blind spot, to suddenly and massively ignore the self-enhancing activities that seem to give our lives such meaning and purpose.

For those of us who are privileged: inattention, living in our own illusory worlds, not paying attention to our conditioning, is actually a huge luxury. We can thus sustain our physical and psychological worlds, and this act of sustaining our worlds comes at great cost, both psychologically and materially.

Let's not assume that the underprivileged are not interested in reality, or in attention, or in a truly compassionate state. Those who have suffered war and severe deprivation may truly understand, in a way that many of us cannot, that social structures and identities are divisive and violent, and cannot give us the peace and security they promise. They may understand that, since we are all droplets in the wave of violence and nationalism and caste identity and religious identity, we should all rigorously enquire into the human mind, the human consciousness that has created these waves of which we are so integral a part. Those who live on the edges of society may recognise the illusions we live under—both psychological and social—far more clearly than I who live a rather protected and safe life. The poor are not waiting for the permission of the privileged in order to enquire. And if those who are socially vulnerable have drawn energy to

explore these radical ideas and ways of being, is it not important that I, who do not "suffer," explore them as well?

Krishnamurti often stressed that "the inner always overcomes the outer." Human emotion and conditioning manage to overpower all social structures designed to contain them. Hence, a country with a fair, logical constitution may be simmering with deep hatreds and tensions. These hatreds cannot be solved by laws. They can only be addressed if we, as individuals and communities, are deeply interested in the real and in the ending of the illusion of the self.



No one can, unfortunately, dictate this journey of awareness to others as the “way.” All such assertions tend to lead to violent outcomes and rigid attitudes. At the same time, it is very unlikely that the majority of members of a community— whether privileged or not— will spontaneously become interested in these questions. Some individuals seem to spontaneously “fall in love” with this journey— no one knows why. Does such a journey possess a privileged attitude, the solution to all our human problems? No, but it does deeply question traditional and ossified ways of being, and such questioning sets loose vast personal and social energy.

The role of education is crucial. Education can provide us a window through which we, the students and those responsible for them, can question our given realities. The young, when exposed to glimpses of reality (or at the least, glimpses of the distortions which we take to be real) may awaken deeply to the nature of the problem of thought, conditioning and the self. How is this education to be realised, to be transmitted? No one knows, for sure; it is for each generation, each community, each individual surely, to discover for themselves. It is sad that we can’t rely on simple formulae in this realm!

What is a bit peculiar and unique to our educational context at CFL is that we derive joy, and a sense of insight, from enquiring together, examining our own lives together through speech and listening. Of course, this activity, like

any other, can be ideological, biased, rigid. And of course, only some of us with the luxury of time and physical security can come together to discuss fundamental issues (all the more reason we should take this fundamental act the more seriously). But actually, all we need to do when we come together is to listen to ourselves and each other as the flow of ideas, conclusions and insights flow past and through us. We do need to come together to talk, in an organisation such as ours, with children to be looked after— and it is surprising how enmeshed and entangled adult egos can become in this (seemingly) simple act of looking after children together! Our assumptions, our thought processes, our self-protective structures need to be patiently looked at and exposed for what they are. But simple listening is the only act required of us. This listening immediately exposes the defences of the ego.

We hear that, in indigenous communities, there are open-ended sessions of discussion that are grounded in listening and silence, with no immediate agenda but simply to have a sense of quiet and being heard. We too enjoy dialogue for its own sake: not to solve problems necessarily, but to allow the river of consciousness to flow through us and to become aware of it choicelessly, not trying to pick and choose but becoming aware of the totality of our human condition. This process is the great jewel that we hold close.





Through fresh eyes

It has been two and a half years since I joined CFL as a full-time teacher. There is a running joke that when a new teacher joins, the 'honeymoon period' lasts for about six to eight months. The early days of being a teacher at CFL are, indeed, a period of leisurely learning, observation, and reflection, as one is gradually inducted into areas of responsibility with ample buffer.

Every new teacher is assigned a mentor for the first two years. Other than offering support in practical matters, a mentor's role is to weave a broader picture of the many nuances of this venture. It's only a matter of time before one begins to feel deeply responsible for shaping the nature of life here. In my mentorship sessions, I was often encouraged to think about this education from scratch, be it through thought experiments or hypothetical scenarios, or through observation of how one relates in this space. Our conversations helped bring forth my own assumptions and conclusions about the structure, and allowed me to learn how to hold them lightly.

Last year, I was asked by a visitor to summarize the essentials of CFL education. A lot has, of course, been written about our educational approach and philosophy in the previous newsletters, and I remember being enticed by those

writings before I had joined as a teacher. And yet, after all the reading and discussions, when I encountered this question, I was immediately aware of a feeling of shortsightedness in myself. Have I been here long enough to meaningfully answer this question?

But pondering upon this question led me to reflect on my last two years in CFL as a new teacher. When a teacher joins CFL, she undoubtedly inherits a legacy which has been carefully crafted and sustained by many for several years. Over time, there is an immense amount of learning about various facets of the work. But she must see anew, and see for herself, what this education entails and its place in the world. Interestingly, the nature of this seeing is very different from any experience which can be gained over time, but more on that later.

When I think of what we're doing here, I am reminded of this poem.

The world is full of mostly invisible things,
And there is no way but putting the mind's eye,
Or its nose, in a book, to find them out,
Things like the square root of Everest
Or how many times Byron goes into Texas,
Or whether the law of the excluded middle



Applies west of the Rockies. For these
And the like reasons, you have to go to school
And study books and listen to what you are told,
And sometimes try to remember. Though I don't know
What you will do with the mean annual rainfall
On Plato's Republic, or the calorie content
Of the Diet of Worms, such things are said to be
Good for you, and you will have to learn them
In order to become one of the grown-ups
Who sees invisible things neither steadily nor whole,
But keeps gravely the grand confusion of the world
Under his hat, which is where it belongs,
And teaches small children to do this in their turn.
– To David, About His Education, by Howard Nemerov

Ironically, the paradox of knowledge presented in the poem is quite relatable for us. We do spend a considerable amount of time teaching kids 'the calorie content of the diet of worms' — accepting that knowledge has a place in the world, yet approaching it with a measure of skepticism and caution. This knowledge-based learning is not at all central to what we are interested in exploring, although much of our structured time is devoted to it. There are countless examples of such paradoxes in our daily life here! How does one live at the cusp of opposing forces, which appear as contradictions in everyday life?

Being part of this experiment which inquires into the possibility of a mind free of fear and influences, perhaps one is forced to encounter these psychological shackles in oneself more frequently. There is no validation of these deeply ingrained patterns through structural rewards or external appraisals, and thus, no easy escape from the psychological suffering they can bring. In fact, the very nature of our work is such that it is enriched by the sustained examination of these inner dispositions.

As a teacher here, one realizes that one is not immune to 'the grand confusion of the world'. And neither are those who are going through this education, and who are also being subjected to tremendous social influences every second of their lives. A commitment and curiosity toward understanding the nature of the worldly mind has profound implications—both in one's daily living and in how one relates to the world at large. But this is by no means an easy journey. Outcomes, if at all one should look for them, are very subtle in our approach; and in this context, it is saddening if some of our students develop cynicism towards the school when they are young adults.

The trick, then, perhaps, is to stay in touch with the space within us where all of these contradictions are held. It is one of those 'invisible things' which cannot be acquired from a book, and neither can it be taught. But funnily, a steady and gentle exploration of this space is central to our education.

I have found that there is something liberating about a space that is set up around questions rather than answers. Questions which are so fundamental in nature do not have resolutions that can be jotted down and referred to. Such questions must be lived—and lived afresh each time. Through the perception of that space, one may also encounter the possibility of lightness—of not taking oneself too seriously. One is able to see oneself not as a fixed identity, but as a question, a movement, a process—free of the heavy finality of all that one imagines one should be.

As I mentioned earlier, the relevance of this education in the world is not revealed gradually, over time. Rather it comes through a direct acquaintance with one's own inward tendencies—tendencies that are also characteristic of all human minds. It is quite surreal to recognize that it is the same mind, wrought with divisions, fear and self-centeredness, which reverberates across time and culture and is responsible for wars, racism, global warming and other man-made calamities. Thus, regardless of how long we have been here, each of us carries these questions in our own unique way. And yet, they arise from an invisible space of shared human experience.

Wildlife and co-existence

May 25th, 2025:

It was a windy morning and as I looked outside my window, I saw five peahens cautiously walking through the sanctuary, darting their eyes here and there. The recent rains had softened the ground and they were looking for food as they made their way.

When I look back at the way my relationship with wildlife has meandered through my life, I find some distinct stops on the road; I could call them points of perspective. As an outing and to do something special, children, (and I too) went to zoos to see wild animals. 'Bizarre' creatures outside of their own habitats would pace or stare at human beings, and humans would stare back. I would marvel, sometimes taunt them. In that model, wildlife was kept at bay, objectified and removed from their own contexts, but through my eyes at that stage, there was just wonder and curiosity. Everything on display was labeled and at the end of the day, I could feel my outing was successful. It was an experience!

Then I remember young families (and again, my children and we, experience this too!) going on safaris in beautiful jungles where wildlife is more at home, but is still to be





viewed with awe from a distance. Even the hint of an elephant or a glimpse of a hornbill were special and humbling! The sense of something larger than oneself came, and the sense of anticipation to see a creature, rather than have it at one's beck and call, like in a zoo. It is true that this safari approach also separated me from wildlife, as I was still journeying to view a creature, take pictures, and go back home, but this process seemed somehow more benign.

Finally, living on the CFL campus is another experience altogether. It is not something to be packaged in the same way, I realize. Over the years, it has sunk in for me that I live with these beautiful and dangerous creatures! Of course, I am in the sanctuary of the campus but within my safe and sturdy home! Nevertheless, I am aware that these beings roam, nest, breed, eat and fight either day or night, and I am gradually becoming cognizant of their lives alongside mine, and feeling humbled by their wildness. We use the same paths, I notice their footprints in the wet sand; there is scat. We live in a fraction of the vast territory of leopards, we sleep while bears bumble along to find termites and jackfruit, we have a singing assembly at school while a paradise fly catcher

weaves in and out of the hall, we sit on a rock for quiet time and notice a snake sunning itself near a pond. It is a 'co-existence'.

Some alumni of the school have helped us feel this co-existence and respect it! Also, more recently, a wildlife biologist and friend visited the school a few times and spoken with students and adults to help contextualize where we live. This approach has let us wonder and watch all that is around us and not engage only through knowledge, fear or labels. Through the windows of my eyes and the literal windows of my home, I could witness movements or sounds of the wild without being noticed. The peacock, the boar, and the mongoose seemed free to wander at dusk or dawn, moving through the campus.

Human-wildlife coexistence is as complex and context-specific as conflict. At the most basic level, the goal of coexistence requires that at some level and in some form, humans must choose to share landscapes and natural resources with wildlife in sustainable ways.... (IUCN Species Survival Commission)

General studies programme

This year, we encouraged our 15- to 16-year-old students to explore their neighbourhoods in both open-ended and microscopic ways. The goal was for them to notice aspects of their surroundings that may have previously gone unnoticed, using a range of lenses such as caste, class, occupation, migration, urbanization, religion, natural spaces, waste management, ecological viability, food, globalization and more.

Through discussions and field visits, we sought to understand the lives of the people living in these neighbourhoods and the ways we are interconnected. The students also had the opportunity to observe and appreciate the roles played by specific individuals who contribute to the comfort and functioning of their communities. This enabled a sense of understanding about these people and their work.

Our field visits made the inequality in society starkly evident. This inequality manifested in various forms, including living conditions, salaries, language, realities of migration and the nature of work. It became clear how deeply entrenched social segregation is within our society.

Throughout the course, we were confronted with difficult questions about privilege, equity, inequality, oppression, power, politics, environmental degradation, and discrimination—issues that persist in Indian society, particularly in urban areas. These reflections prompted us to question the realities of the neighbourhoods we inhabit and to consider what alternative possibilities might exist.

There is still much to explore in this realm, and we hope to continue this cone-like, broad-to-specific engagement with our local areas in the future.





Stuff happened

A number of parents helped out last year with teaching a range of things from cooking to crocheting: Anand, Kade, Kiran and Shally, Pragnya, Rashmi, Nitin. This was in addition to the regular, sustained support we receive from parents in the kitchen year on year. Some help us with deep cleaning, some with quiet chopping, some with noisy cooking, some with endless roti-making...we're grateful for it all. Former student Ayesha continues to support us in craft and on the land every week. Former student Akil came by for some weeks and was of great support; here is part of a poem she wrote for us when she left:

*... thirty days
and too few seconds
to breathe in their love
sticky hands and paint smears
holes in pants and thorn pricks
it's seconds of parole
and knees pressed together for storytime*

Gerard Bayle swung by CFL and directed a senior play for performance: excerpts from *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Dario Fo. The students had read through this intellectual, farci-

cal play, enjoying Fo's take on state corruption and the absurdity of authority. They could only share a small glimpse of this play with us, but the evening's performance was absolutely excellent, and bore the stamp of Gerard's genius, on top of that of our very own teachers and students.

Ravi Chellam, wildlife biologist, helped this year in our ongoing attempts to understand how we can co-exist with all the wild animals that either live on or pass through our beautiful campus. He spoke with the teachers at length, then made a riveting presentation to the whole school about Big Cats, then responded to the senior students' questions about how to navigate the various parts of the campus in light and dark. Finally, he facilitated a discussion among parents on these topics, walking a fine line between reassuring them and scaring them; it was quite the balancing act!

P L Udaya Kumar, a passionate historian of ancient Bengaluru, spent a day here together with writer and CFL friend Ashwin Prabhu. They told us

how we can learn history from inscription stones that are scattered all over the city and its surrounds, and in the evening joined the middle schoolers on a walk to a nearby 12th century temple. Safe to say, by end of day, the teachers who engaged with them were way more excited about inscription stones than any of the middle schoolers...

In October we had an exciting visit from Stephen Porter, a classical pianist of international repute. He came to raise funds for the school by holding a concert in the city, playing three famous Beethoven pieces. As a bonus, he spent a week with us at school. We were so grateful for his gift of music, gentle and humorous interaction with children 6-18 years old, and of course the generous concert itself. Stephen praised the students' quiet and attentive presence in his assembly presentation, and we collectively blushed.

Derek Hook came by and did his famous storytelling assembly while everyone, of all ages, sat enthralled. Accompanying him this year were friends from Krishnamurti foundations

abroad—Alistair Herron, Darcy Gray and Jeff Welch—with whom the teachers enjoyed conversations. Steve and Wendy Smith from the Krishnamurti Foundation Trust in the UK came and stayed a week, and joined us in dialogues on fundamental questions for our work. Katie Geddes visited us from the US and took a class for the class 10 students on her work on the impact of climate change on tuna fisheries and fisherfolk. Ludovica from the Netherlands stayed a few weeks at CFL, attended senior classes and helped in many areas around the school; her mother and grandmother have both been good friends of CFL in decades past, so she is a third-generation visitor (which makes some of us feel very old!).

Our middle and junior school students worked on Hindi and Kannada plays, which countless previous generations of CFL students have also performed. One was the Panchatantra story '*Mrugaraja Simha Mattu Iligalu*' (*Lion King and the Rats*). Another was '*Abhinav Pampa Mattu Kantidevi*', a play set in the 12th century in the court

of the Hoysala king Vishnuvardhan. It is partly in '*Hailegannada*' (old Kannada) and weaves poetry together with humour. Both plays were written by the late Leela Garady, language teacher at CFL in the early years. The height of excitement for children is the dressing up, wearing sarees and dhotis, and having moustaches painted on their faces which they keep on all day. The Bilvas and Tamalas performed a Hindi play, *Tumne Mera Anda Toh Nahi Dekha*, inspired by a delightful Eklavya Pitaara picture book about a hen searching for her lost egg. Over the term, the young actors immersed themselves in learning their lines, creating masks, and exploring animal characters through language and movement. The process culminated in a short performance for the whole school in March, where they creatively used cardboard boxes and dupattas as props and costumes.

The garden yield was good last year, 871 kilos, all of which we consumed: radish, cucumber, ladies' finger, chillies, raw mango, amaranth, spinach, basil, tomatoes, custard apple, cherry

tomatoes, sorrel/roselle, pumpkin, sweet potatoes, brinjal, cluster beans, papaya, ash gourd, banana, guava, ram phal, tamarind, fenugreek, drum stick, sapota, pumpkin leaves and flowers.

Three long-term teachers of CFL have left the school this last year. Navneeth Thirumalai taught and learned alongside some of us teachers for over a decade; we thank him for all he did for our school community and wish him well for the future. Usha Krishnamoorthy and Gururaj Choudhari spent the last several years at CFL, leaving behind many good memories; again, we are grateful for their years of work here and wish them well going ahead. Munesha, who has worked at CFL doing various jobs for over five years, is leaving as well, and we wish him a happy married life ahead! And finally we welcome a new employee on our campus, Rohit Kumar Baghel from Chhatisgarh, who will fill Munesha's shoes. Either he will learn Kannada, or everyone around him will learn Hindi and Halbi, it's anybody's guess which happens first!





Friends of CFL: a fund-raising appeal

CFL has a unique economic model. We are acutely conscious of the inequality in our society and how access to good education is a privilege. From the beginning we have made some conscious financial choices: parents will not bear the entire cost of this education, we will take modest salaries, we will have tight control on costs, and financial limitations must not deter interested parents wanting to pursue a CFL education. Based on this financial philosophy, we have created an unconditional scholarship programme. To illustrate, in the financial year 2024-2025, 29% of our parents requested scholarships ranging from 18% to 100%. The total scholarship demand was Rs 38 lakhs. In the financial year 2025-2026, 36% of our parents have requested scholarships ranging from 13% to 100%. The total scholarship demand is Rs 45 lakhs.

Our financial philosophy creates a shortfall between income and expenditure every year, and every year we must raise funds to meet this deficit. We meet this deficit through income from our corpus, and from donations. We would like to meet this year's 45 lakh target with our Friends of CFL programme. The idea behind micro-charity programme such as this is to seek donations that will not be a burden to a donor. No amount is too small an amount for us, and we are grateful for every rupee that we receive as support for our work.

If you are interested in joining the "Friends of CFL" programme, please do contact us by sending an email to the address below with "Friends of CFL" in the subject box. Thank you very much for your support.

Donor information: Centre For Learning is a registered charitable society. Donations to the society are exempt from Income Tax to the extent provided for under section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961. If you wish to avail tax exemption in the USA, please email us for details.

For more information, please visit <https://cfl.in/support-us/how-can-i-help-cfl/>

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