

# IS FREEDOM FROM CONDITIONING REALLY POSSIBLE?

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Anyone who is interested in Krishnamurti's teachings, and has attended to them by listening to some of his talks or reading some of his books will come across the concept of **conditioning**. Actually, before I encountered Krishnamurti's use of the term, I thought about conditioning in more specific ways than he seems to use it. For me, conditioning was a term mostly used in psychology for a kind of behaviour modification. It was a **purposefully developed response to a stimulus**. So, for example, the psychologist Ivan Pavlov rang a bell, every time he gave his dogs food and they smelled its aroma. He noticed that they salivated in anticipation of the food. They were so conditioned to associate the ringing of the bell with the arrival of food that eventually they salivated merely at the sound of a ringing bell. The stimulus was completely different from the behaviour it induced. We, too, are conditioned to respond to alarms, sirens, church bells, and so on, for instance.

In the 70s and 80s, the psychologist B. F. Skinner promoted the notion of operant conditioning in which animal behaviour could be controlled both positively and negatively. A pleasurable stimulus such as getting food could get an animal to respond (pressing a lever to get a food pellet), and a negative stimulus could also elicit particular behaviours (giving the animal an electric shock, would cause it to avoid a particular place). We now routinely refer to the "stick and carrot" approach, which means "punishment and reward" as a way of controlling and conditioning behaviour. We, too, are conditioned this way by paycheques, promotions, awards, reprimands, dismissals, and holidays, for instance.

The term “conditioning” is also used in physical training to refer to modes of exercising the body so that it is strong, flexible, and cardiovascularly fit. A body that is generally well conditioned is capable of taking up the specialized training for particular kinds of sports. We (or at least, I, for instance) am not particularly well-conditioned in this manner.

Krishnamurti, however, uses the term conditioning much more broadly, to refer to the full array of factors that shape and affect our lives. He says,

We are conditioned – physically, nervously, mentally – by the climate we live in and the food we eat, by the culture in which we live, by the whole of our social, religious and economic environment, by our experience, by education and by family pressures and influences . . . Our conscious and unconscious responses to all the challenges of the environment – intellectual, emotional, outward and inward – all these are the action of conditioning. Language is conditioning; thought is the action, the response of conditioning (*Second Penguin Reader*, 277).

In his Talks and Dialogues in Sydney, Australia, in 1970 he said this:

Most of us - all of us - are conditioned by the culture in which we live. You are conditioned as Australians with a lovely climate and all the rest of it, by the education, by the belief, by the religious structure in which you're caught, so you are conditioned. And a conditioned **mind** thinks it can solve the human problem. It cannot. It must be free of that conditioning. If I, born in India, remain a Hindu and want to resolve the whole human structure, human problem, human misery according to the conditioned **mind** in that particular culture, it will be impossible.

To solve the human problem the **mind** must be entirely **unconditioned**, that is, it has to become aware of its own conditioning, aware to observe without any choice, without any distortion and that's why it's very important to understand conflict. Every form of conflict distorts the **mind**. We are saying there is a way of living which

is not the way of analysis, the way of will, the way of conformity, but to observe, to see things actually as they are.

There is a lot contained in those words, but it seems to suggest that Krishnamurti is saying that our problems are caused by our conditioning, and that to solve our problems the mind must be unconditioned. Actually, he does say that. Let's take up some of those sentences slowly. "Most of us – all of us – are conditioned by the culture in which we live." That is quite straightforward. All cultural anthropologists would agree with that statement. Everybody is conditioned by their culture. He then says,

And a conditioned **mind** thinks it can solve the human problem. It cannot. It must be free of that conditioning.

And then, jumping ahead a bit, he says,

"To solve the human problem the **mind must** be entirely **unconditioned.**"

He also talks about conflict, and although it seems out of place in this context, it most certainly is not, and we will come back to the issue of conflict at the end of this talk.

Spiritual teachers and teachings often point us to the possibility of freedom from conditioning. In various Hindu philosophies, this freedom is called *mokṣa*, and in Buddhism, it is called *nirvāṇa*. And Krishnamurti talks about the unconditioned mind, and also speaks about the necessity of freedom. Let me quote him again, so there is no ambiguity:

"**Freedom** is absolutely necessary. Without a **free** mind, a mind that's not distorted, that's not crippled by the cultural **conditioning**, without such a mind which is **free**, one cannot possibly perceive what is truth." (J. Krishnamurti Talks and Dialogues Sydney 1970 1st Public Talk 21st November, 1970)

This brings me to the topic of my talk today, which asks the question: "Is freedom from conditioning really possible?" I suppose there are two possible answers. "Yes, freedom from conditioning is possible," and "No, freedom from conditioning is not possible." Now,

the typical seeker of radical psychological transformation or self-realization or liberation, or whatever you wish to call it, that seeker undoubtedly must think that freedom from conditioning is possible. I will put them into the “yes” camp. Of course, there are people, perhaps the majority of human beings, who don’t think or care much about their conditioning, much less freedom from it. They may be conditioned to be devout Hindus, Muslims, or Christians, patriotic Americans, Chinese, or Indians, and are generally engaged in trying to eke out meaning or happiness in this life or the imagined afterlife. And finally, there are those who would answer, “No, freedom from conditioning is not possible.” I must confess at the outset that I belong to this latter “no” camp, probably along with certain psychologists, skeptics, and pessimists. However, my reasons for holding that freedom from conditioning is not possible are quite likely governed by different rationales than the skeptics and pessimists. Moreover, while asserting that freedom from conditioning is not possible, I also assert that freedom is essential.

If this sounds confusing, it is because it is. While the idea of freedom may not be of any concern to those who are not interested in understanding themselves or coming upon “truth,” the quest can be a painful obsession for those who are gripped with the prospect of the necessity and possibility of freedom from conditioning. Many of the people who have listened to or read Krishnamurti, and other spiritual teachings, such as those of Yoga, Vedanta, or Buddhism, may find themselves intensely in pursuit of liberation from conditioning. **After all, isn’t that what these teachers and teachings tell us we should attain?** For such seekers, isn’t a good part of one’s frustration based on recognizing the truth about conditioning, and striving in various ways to be free from it? Perhaps one even longs for the time, or yearns for an experience, when one’s mind will be unconditioned, when one will achieve the sought after freedom. Don’t seekers constantly keep looking for teachers, for teachings, for prescriptions and practices that will enable them to overcome the obstacles to clear perception and thereby apprehend the truth with an unconditioned mind? Don’t they read book after book, attend talk after talk, engage in various forms of meditative practices, struggle to evaluate and then adopt moral lifestyles, in order to be

free from conditioning, and from the distortions that conditioning seemingly places on the truth?

Indeed, if freedom from conditioning is the goal, and if it is a genuine possibility, then the question that inevitably arises is, “How may I be free from my conditioning?” Now if the seeker happens to have sought out a teacher in the Zen Buddhist tradition, he or she may be instructed to watch his or her breath, to sit *zazen*, and perhaps meditate upon an enigmatic question, such as a *koan*. You know, as the Zen master Shogen asked, “Why does the enlightened man not stand on his feet and explain himself?” (Answer: because he is sitting down, explaining someone else). Or a Yoga master may offer the technique of chanting a sacred Sanskrit verse or a syllable, such as Aum/Om. Now, anyone who has read a bit of Krishnamurti, and been influenced (or should I provocatively say, conditioned) by his teachings, will immediately jump upon the question, “How may I be free from my conditioning?” The rote answer in Krishnamurti circles is: “There is no “how”.” To ask “how,” is to ask for a method, a system, and to accept the advice and guidance of someone else, who can come to be regarded as an authority, a master, instead of seeking one’s own way. To ask “how do I become free of conditioning?” is to ask someone else for their path to the truth. Krishnamurti would probably agree with all of those rationales as to why asking “how” is a poor question. However, this Krishnamurti-conditioned attitude and response is often misconstrued by seekers as “I must not follow anyone else’s path to freedom, but must forge my own path.” This attitude is problematic on many counts, one of which is voiced in Benjamin Franklin’s quip, “He who teaches himself has a fool for his master.”

This simple fact is that Krishnamurti himself offered guidance on the issue of freedom from conditioning in many ways and at many times. Let me quote him extensively again. In the following quote he is using the word “structure,” as a sort of synonym for conditioning.

What is this structure? What is the “me” who is the result of that structure? The structure is based on envy, greed, worship of success, power, position, prestige, the desire to be completely, isolatedly secure. All the wars, nationalities, divisions of religions, the family opposed to another family, all that is me. And can I in myself change all that, stop completely being competitive, imitative, conforming, violent? **Obviously one can. And one must**, if one wants to bring about a radical revolution both inwardly and outwardly. **It must begin with the mind that is free from the conditioning which the culture has imposed upon it. And you ask how?** (J. Krishnamurti *Talks and Dialogues* Sydney 1970 1st Public Talk 21st November, 1970)

And here is an example of Krishnamurti answering the “how” question.

The “how” is to observe, to become aware, be passionate to find out, not to be caught in a series of systems, which means you have to observe, learn and be intense and passionate to change. Not to change the world but change the world which is me. (ibid.)

Evidently, for Krishnamurti, observation, awareness, passion and intensity to find out is necessary for change. Mind you, one does not change the world externally, but “the world which is me.”

Now all this seems to suggest that the proper answer to the question, “Is freedom from conditioning really possible?” is a resounding “Yes!” And that there is even a prescription offered for how it may be done. Why then do I hold the opposite view? Why do I contend that freedom from conditioning is not only not possible, but not desirable or realistic?

First of all, not all conditioning is bad. In fact, conditioning is necessary for survival in this world. Without conditioning I would be unable to speak a language or to write. Although I have now mostly forgotten what was involved, I and you spent many hours every day, for years, learning how to speak and to write. The way I dress, my fashion sensibility (or lack

thereof), my mannerisms, the way I eat and what I choose to eat, the way I comb my hair, the music that I listen to, and so on, are all part of a purposefully and culturally constructed matrix, that allows me to be the social being that I am. It enables me to function effectively in the world. So, conditioning is desirable. Most of us do not want to be isolated ascetics, living in caves or on mountaintops, unwilling or unable to interact with our fellow human-beings. But a surprisingly large number of people throughout history have thought that such isolation is necessary for liberation. Isolation may help, but it may also be a hindrance, and it is certainly not necessary.

Not only is conditioning desirable, then, it is also impossible to be free from it. Just as the environment shapes a wind-swept tree that clings to a rocky outcrop by a lake, we are constantly being conditioned. Think of those songs that, no matter how awful they may be, we simply can't get out of our head (recently there is one by Lady Gaga that comes to mind). We are physically conditioned by the wind that blows through our hair, crippled by earthquakes, accidents, or warfare, shaped by the foods we eat (or overeat). We are mentally conditioned by our systems of education, spouting off tidbits of knowledge garnered from TV shows, books, the internet, newspapers, and courses we have taken. And we are emotionally conditioned by our religious teachers, friends, and family members. This is not something that occurred in the past, but something that is going on at this very instant.

So, "Is freedom from conditioning really possible?" Of course not! Not only is it not possible, it is not desirable. Then what in heaven's name are the spiritual teachers and teachings talking about. Are they wrong, and I right? Or is it the other way around? Or are we both wrong? Or both right? Now, one may also be thinking, "Hey, I'm not really interested in Hillary's perspective on the question. Who is he anyway? I am interested in Krishnamurti's thought and teaching." But if anyone has really listened to Krishnamurti, he made it very clear that one should not follow his teachings blindly, but inquire into things for oneself. As an aside, since I am speaking to a Krishnamurti-oriented audience, a

cardinal pitfall can be an obsession with the teacher and the teachings. What I mean by that, is that instead of putting the teachings into practice, because one has gleaned a few precious nuggets from them, one wants to mine them for every last bit of treasure. You all know the image of the seeker wanting to find the moon, but when the master points to it, the seeker stares at the finger instead of the moon. Krishnamurti and his teachings, anybody and their teachings, are simply fingers pointing. The moon is yourself, your consciousness, this moment, and its apprehension of this reality, here and now. And it so happens that Krishnamurti is not here, except in spirit, and we are talking to each other, here and now. And we are inquiring into the question whether freedom from conditioning is really possible, and I say no: not possible and not desirable, although it is often desired. But I also say that freedom and an unconditioned mind are essential. Is this paradoxical? Am I proposing something impossible, like saying, you must be a virgin and a mother.

Perhaps it is not impossible, but just really rare. Perhaps Krishnamurti was the only person who was free from conditioning in this generation, or even in all of history? Or perhaps there were a few more in history, such as the Buddha. But if freedom from conditioning is not really possible, except for a few persons, then the Buddha and Krishnamurti seem to have spent their entire lives speaking about something only to glorify themselves. "See me, I'm unconditioned. You must have an unconditioned mind to find out the truth, but you really can't. It happens so rarely to people. There is no way to get it, but I've got it . . . and so on." Actually, in the Indian traditions, they do make quite a bit about how rare, precious, and difficult an attainment liberation actually is. On this I also disagree. Liberation is neither rare nor common. It is neither difficult nor easy.

So what are we left with? It seems that we are left with a whole assortment of questions about the nature of conditioning, and whether freedom from it is actually possible for you or me. Moreover, there appear to be contradictory assertions about it. Whom should one believe? Whom should one trust? What must one do? Why should one bother?



Now, it would seem terribly uncompassionate if I were to leave you with all these questions unresolved. But actually, that is not true. These are questions into which one should inquire passionately: independently or collectively. But let me share with you my discoveries, for what they are worth. Rather conveniently, it turns out that they do not appear to be different from Krishnamurti's. I'll cite him, because you are likely more interested in his thought than mine. Perhaps to you he is a greater authority figure. To think that Krishnamurti is asking us to be free from conditioning in order to find the truth is a misreading, or misunderstanding of his teaching. Remember that when prescribing "how" to have an unconditioned mind, he said to observe, be aware, inquire passionately, and so on. But listen to this:

"Therefore, it is absolutely essential that a mind be **free** to enquire, to observe and to understand."

In other words, **you must first be free!** Only then can you inquire. Inquiry does not lead to freedom. Sincere inquiry is a movement in freedom.

Let me quote him further.

There is freedom from something; freedom from anger, freedom from competitive, aggressive drive. Freedom "from" is one thing, and freedom is another. Freedom "from" something is a reaction, a contradiction, pursuing the opposite; whereas, there is such a thing as freedom, not "from" something. This may be rather difficult to comprehend but we have to understand it. We are always thinking in terms of freedom from something, freedom from tyranny, freedom from attachment, and so on. Actually, if you go into it, you will see that that is not freedom at all. In that there is always suppression, conformity or adjustment, because the opposite always contains its own opposite, whereas freedom is something entirely different.

Freedom has no opposite. If I want to see something very clearly, the mind must be totally free to observe and that freedom is not a reaction or response from what is."

(J. Krishnamurti Talks and Dialogues Sydney 1970 5th Public Talk 29th November, 1970).

An unconditioned mind is essential to discover truth, because only such a mind is free. But conditioning is an inevitable and ongoing process in our lives, everybody's lives. The thinking mind is a conditioned mind, because it is conditioned by experience, impressions, and so on, which it imprints through images, words, and so on. But what-is, that is, the reality of what is occurring at this moment, here and now, is the fountainhead of truth. No thoughts can do it justice, anymore that the word "this" can adequately convey the fullness of what is being pointed to. Uncontrived awareness of this is available to everyone, everywhere, at anytime. It is available here and now. Awareness can be coloured by our thinking minds, but it need not be. Too often we look with our thoughts instead of with our eyes. We listen with our thoughts rather than with our ears. Sensitive listening, and plain seeing, without thinking, are already manifestations of unconditioned mind.

Such a mind is able to observe the processes of conditioning at work. Such a mind is already free. It is able to notice how thought shapes and colors our perceptions. Such a mind does not seek to be free from conditioning. It recognizes that the idea of freedom from conditioning is a thought-constructed desideratum, grounded in the grasping for identity, the desire to sustain a particular image of the self. Instead of simply noting the processes of conditioning continuously at work from the state of freedom, one identifies with the thought "I am conditioned." Or, "look how conditioned they are," which indirectly also constructs a self in contrast to "them." One may next identify with the thought, "I should be free of my conditioning, because then my life would be better, because then I will be able to apprehend the truth," and so on. In both such examples, there is an image of self (as conditioned), that is striving for another imagined state (unconditioned). In the disjuncture between these two states, psychological time is created as the conditioned self strives to become the imagined unconditioned self (to become like the Buddha, or Krishnamurti, or whomever). That illusory interval of time is indeed an eternity, which is why striving for liberation takes forever. Moreover, within that interval of time, there is

**suffering and conflict**, as the dissatisfied conditioned self strives to become free from its conditioning. [Remember I said we would get back to the issue of conflict]. The **conflicted** self is the thinking self. It exists in a state of mind in which unconditioned awareness has been forgotten. Let us go back to one of the early quotes by Krishnamurti, near the beginning of this talk. You will see that it is valuable to read him very closely, and to go through the words to what they are actually pointing, to look at the moon, not the finger. I like to give him the last word.

To solve the human problem the **mind** must be entirely **unconditioned**, that is, **it has to become aware of its own conditioning**, aware to observe without any choice, without any distortion and **that's why it's very important to understand conflict**. Every form of conflict distorts the **mind**. We are saying there is a way of living which is not the way of analysis, the way of will, the way of conformity, but to observe, to see things actually as they are.