

***The Valley School in Bangalore, India:
An Interview with Neetu Singh***

Neetu Singh is a Teacher and Program Coordinator at the Study Centre of the Valley School, a school established in 1978 based on the teachings of the eminent philosopher and thinker, Jiddu Krishnamurti. The school is located in South India near Bangalore in a picturesque valley with undulating hills and farms with a reserve forest on the fringe. It has 110 acres of dense vegetation, with a lake on one side and a running stream. The school, Art Village and the Study Centre are located on the same campus. Peggy Whalen-Levitt interviewed Neetu on May 4, 2005

PWL: I understand that there was a year-long search for the land where the school now resides. Krishnamurti knew that the land should be about 100 acres. When he walked through the wilderness site that included streams, a lake, woodland and meadows, he knew the school had found its home. What is it about this site that supports the vision of the Valley School?

NS: One of the things that perhaps attracted Krishnamurti to this land was the giant Banyan tree and he had some special attraction towards that tree. In fact, the other schools in India have a huge banyan tree. And this one happens to have a fairly old banyan tree, perhaps a hundred years old. That's my guess. But I think it was more on the feeling level. From what I understand, he walked the land and when he came out he said "This is the right land, the right place to start the school."

PWL: As I learn more about The Valley School, I am struck by the ways in which the school nurtures a sensitivity to place. In creating a walk to the Art Village, for example, an attempt has been made to create a natural ambience of bamboo grove, stream, tall trees and pond. How did the school's founders go about creating this environment?

NS: When the original educators started the school, it was just a barren land. There were two or three trees like the banyan tree and the tamarind tree, and you could actually see the whole expanse. But now the whole area has been regenerated into a forest. So, they had to figure everything out from the beginning. What would we like the school to be? Twenty-seven years ago this place was very far away from the city. When they sat down to decide how to make a school, how to organize 110 acres of land, they put the structures at the borders. So that when the children walk from the school to the Art Village, or from the school to the Study Centre, they have to walk through the forest. They don't really have to make a deliberate effort or time to go into the forest. They have to do it, it's part of being there.

PWL: The school art director has said that "The (Art) Village offers a silent space for the creative minds to meet in the midst of trees, the rushing stream and the call of birds. All of these keep changing each moment to celebrate life in its silence and serenity. And in this silence may sprout a movement, which is the chant of Nature, within and around. Here, the child and the adult may free his mind from its limitation and awaken to the ageless mind that is beyond space, beyond time." This is a very different view of art from the Western notion of self-expression. Would you say that art is experienced as a form of participation with the natural world?

NS: I would say, quite a bit of it, because when the children go to the Art Village, the structure is simple. There's a water pond, there's a huge banyan tree where the children have classes under the tree, and there's a bamboo grove, and the children spend a lot of time outdoors beside the pond, where they will do some drawing and painting. And the representation of the natural world in paintings or drawings is very beautiful. It's extremely touching. And also there's a music room, so you can listen to the music. The sound of music spreads everywhere. So when the children go there, it creates a very nice atmosphere.

PWL: I understand that it was a series of talks that Krishnamurti gave in Bangalore in 1971 that laid the foundation for the opening of The Valley School in 1978. During those talks, Krishnamurti gave a wonderful example of looking at a bougainvillea as follows: "There is not only the sensory perception with the eye: you see this bougainvillea. . . . Then as you observe that colour, you make an image, you have already an image; you have a name for it. You like it or dislike it, you have preferences. So through the images that you have about that flower, you see. You don't actually see, but your mind sees it more than the eye So you are looking, observing with the images, conclusions that you have formed. And, therefore, you are not actually looking at life. . . . So in order to look at your life as it is, there must be freedom of observation." Can you help us understand this "freedom of observation" that seems to be the impulse for the Valley School?

NS: : Many years ago when I started reading the writings of J. Krishnamurti he posed the question – Have you ever looked at the tree? As I examined this question I realized that I had never really looked. I was not really paying attention to what was around me. Because in the kind of societies that we live in, everything is perceived to be for use. So I think in this quote, what is interesting to realize is that Krishnamurti uses the metaphor of looking at a tree to also pose that question, "Have you looked at your own images?" Whether it is the images between a boyfriend and a girlfriend or a husband and a wife, we take those images for granted. We assume that those images are helpful in knowing the other person. What Krishnamurti is asking is, "When you look at that image, what do you see? Is that image helpful or is it actually preventing you from having a direct relationship with the other person?" Then, he has a very famous quote where he says that if you don't have a relationship with the Earth, with a tree, with the flowers, you don't have a relationship with other human beings, because the same principle is involved. When we are looking at the natural world, when we are looking at a tree, are we looking only through our images that it gives us pleasure, it gives us a soothing effect, or can we just look at the way it is? Because if we look at the way it is, it tells a different story. When I look at a tree, for example today on a rainy day, it will change. In the morning, the same tree will seem to wake up, there will be hardly any light on it, and when the sunlight comes, the whole structure and the nature of the tree changes. In the evening, the tree has a somber look. So when I look at it, it is giving a different story. Am I in touch with something? Similarly, in relationship, am I really in touch with the other person? Or am I only approaching the person with the image I have of yesterday, which includes all the hurts and pleasures I've accumulated about the other person? Am I really in touch with that person, because every human being is changing, is evolving, is growing. They are not the same. And they don't like to be treated the same as they were yesterday. Even I don't like to be treated the way I was six months ago. So, that is the main question. Can we really examine the images?

PWL: In the same talk, Krishnamurti spoke the following words. “Look at the sky, look at that tree, look at the beauty of the light, look at the clouds with their curves, with their delicacy. If you look at them without any image, you have understood your own life And so the question is: What is this observer, the observer who has separated himself from the observed? At the moment of experiencing anything, there is no observer. When you look at that sunset - and that sunset is something immense - when you look at it, at that moment there is no observer who says, “I am seeing the sunset.” A second later comes the observer. So how does the observer come into being? When you look at this flower, at the moment you observe it closely, there is no observer, there is only a looking. Then you begin to name that flower. Then you say, “I wish I had it in my garden or in my house.” Then you have already begun to build an image about that flower. So the image-maker is the observer . . . So when you observe, the observer looks at that flower with the eyes of the past. And you don’t know how to look without the observer.” Would you say that the Valley School is a learning community where teachers and children alike are learning “to look without the observer?”

NS: That is a good question. There is a distinction between the program that is at the school and the Study Centre. We have a children’s program at the Study Centre and the school addresses mostly the academic issues. How the teachers address this really depends on the skill of the teachers and their understanding of what Krishnamurti is saying and their own work with nature.

Now, what we do at the Study Centre is somewhat different. When children come to us at the Study Centre, we are mainly interested in, “Can the child be silent?” Because we feel that in silence there is this possibility of observation. If the mind is constantly chattering and involved in some activity, then the capacity to look is somewhat diminished. When the children come to the Study Centre, our whole idea of creating an activity or a program is “Has that activity led to an observation, or to a state of silence first and then to an observation?” So, there is an activity, the movement into silence, and then observation. For example, when the children come to the Study Centre, one of the first things that we do is ask them to sit quietly and just listen to the sounds of birds. We ask them to sit in a proper posture where they can breathe easily and observe their breath. And then we have various activities when they come for a three hour session. Sitting quietly is only one part of that session, perhaps for fifteen or twenty minutes. And then sometimes we have them listen to a piece of music, for example, music of the rivers, or music of the wind. So, when they listen to it, we ask them to construct a story which comes to their mind, or images which come to their mind. And each child is given some time to explore that and share with others what they felt when they were listening to the music. Sometimes we just sit quietly, we don’t listen to music. Later, when we ask them of all the activities they did at the Study Centre for three hours which includes sitting quietly, perhaps having a discussion and going for a nature walk, we ask them to write what they felt about the program at the Centre. One of the key things that they come to is that “I could sit in silence, I didn’t know that I could sit in silence for such a long time.” I think we assume, as adults, that children are not able to sit quietly, that they are quite mischievous and cannot sit quietly. And we try to downplay that activity. But we find that when children leave, that is one of the key activities which they really enjoy. It’s something that they go back with, “When I sat quietly, this is what happened to me: I could listen to the birds, I could just watch my thoughts.” We tell them, “Just observe your thoughts and feelings.” So, they have that capacity, as they have the capacity to do other things.

PWL: How often do they come to you?

NS: They come twice in a term. Four times a year.

PWL: And they would do that all the way through their schooling?

NS: Yes. They start when they are in class one and continue until class twelve. Right now we have children who have been coming for twelve years.

PWL: Can you tell me more about how you nurture the art of listening and looking at the Study Centre?

NS: When the children come to the Study Centre we sit in silence for a while. And then we spend some time in the natural world: going for a walk, drawing, sketching, writing, collecting, and so on. And then we do some activity to develop a relationship with the body. For example, learning very basic movements - yoga movements - to relax the body, to learn how to calm the mind and body together. So, we engage children in various activities to bring the children close to themselves, rather than just being in the intellect. So the first hour is spent relating the child to the senses in some way. And then we have a break where they can wander around the Study Centre and socialize with each other. During this time some children go around the tree and sing songs to the *Peepal* tree.

And then, the key program of the Study Centre is engaging the children in a dialogue, to be able to sit and have an intelligent discussion with others on various issues that relate to their daily life. Some issues are how they relate with their parents, their teachers, with other children, with the world. And we look at social phenomena, for example, environmental degradation. Before the children come to the Study Centre, I go to the different classes and I ask the children to write down their concerns, what they would like to discuss when they come to the Study Centre. And that allows them to open up and be part of the program, rather than the program coming from outside. And then we try to categorize the questions into society, the self, the environment, relationships and so on. When they come to the Study Centre, we may read some questions that they have written and we divide the class into small groups of seven to eight children. In those groups, we try to elicit responses from them to the questions. By engaging their mind by asking questions and encouraging them to express themselves in small groups, they open up and relate what is being discussed to what they are going through. And quite often they come up with wonderful insights into the various issues.

PWL: The Valley School makes a distinction between the cultivation of intelligence and that of intellect, of memory and its skills. Can you help us better understand this distinction between intelligence and intellect?

NS: Intellect is the capacity of the brain to understand something verbally and express something and think logically and rationally. Intellect is independent of emotion and feeling. In schools and colleges, this cultivation of intellect is given the highest importance. And even the whole issue of creativity is looked at in the field of intellect, which is to be able to come up with new ideas and to find out new ways of doing things. All that is in the field of intellect. And intellect, as we know, is

based on knowledge and memory. In fact, if we look at the advancement of modern civilization, it is all based on intellect. Usually, in our society, whether it is East or West, we often confuse intelligence with intellect. We assume that if a person is intellectually quite capable, then he must be intelligent, which is not always true if we really look at life. There are some highly capable people who would admit that they don't have complete intelligence, because intelligence is a much vaster area than intellect. Intelligence would demand that all the capacities of the human being would be paid attention to, which is our capacity to look, to listen, to question, and to learn. Intelligence is the capacity to feel as well as to reason. And I think, to a degree, these things are being recognized now. Even with the work of Howard Gardner, I think, there are listed ten or eleven areas of intelligence, and the list keeps growing.

PWL: At the Valley School, how do you create an environment where intelligence is nurtured?

NS: There are certain areas that can be addressed. One is that we approach learning as heuristic in nature and aims at self learning and self discovery. So we try to create materials and the learning process in such a way that children are taking responsibility for their learning. They are learning at their own pace. They are learning through their own interests. The second area that we are interested in is to create an atmosphere that is free from authority. So that means that the teacher is not there to instruct the children in what they should think or how they should act, rather, the teacher is also learning, he is in the mode of learning, always learning along with the child. The third area which is addressed is without reward and punishment, because we understand that reward and punishment brings about fear, hurt, and self-protective reaction. The fourth area where we can address intelligence is through learning without comparison and competition as they generate envy and antagonism between one human being and another human being. So, you have to see the connection between comparison and fear. And when we see that we are in fear, then can we love? We also go into this question of what is freedom and what is responsibility? Giving freedom without discussing what freedom means, what order means, how they are connected, how responsibility is connected with freedom - just to give freedom is not enough. So, we have to constantly discuss these things among teachers, among children. And then, we are concerned with self-knowledge, which is to understand how we learn, what is our learning pattern, why do we get angry so easily, why do we get irritated, why are we snobbish? All these things are learning about oneself, a constant need for security, not only now but also in the future. So, when we look at all these six areas, those are the kind of learning processes that are necessary to create an atmosphere where intelligence can come about.

PWL: Krishnamurti has said that "if you pass on through the meadows with their thousand flowers of every color imaginable, from bright red to yellow and purple, and their bright green grass washed clean by last night's rain, rich and verdant - again without a single movement of the machinery of thought - then you will know what love is." Would you say that, ultimately, education at the Valley School is an education in service of the possibility of love?

NS: Yes, if we understand the world love correctly. Krishnamurti did explore the word "love" quite often in his talks. His approach to love generally has been to discover what is not love. And actually, putting those factors or those conditions aside, then we discover what is love. For example, attachment is not love. One has to discover what is involved in attachment. What are the implications of attachment?

Krishnamurti summarized aims of education as: (1) a concern for the whole over and above the part and a non-sectarian approach free from prejudice, (2) concern for man and the environment - ending of conflict between human beings and a nondestructive relationship with nature, as humanity and nature are one indivisible process, and (3) religious spirit and the scientific mind working together.

The purpose of education is cultivation of a whole human being. This involves harmony of body, mind, and spirit. Krishnamurti had a vision of looking at life without separation and without breaking things down because the human mind, which is based in thought mostly, breaks things down on the basis of nationalities and religion. Then there is a feeling of separation at a personal level that each human being experiences. So, he pointed out the factors that divide people at various levels and urged people to go beyond that. And then we have this fundamental concern for man and the environment and the relationship between the two. The state of the earth, as we see it, is deteriorating rapidly as the forests disappear and the planet is dying off. There's a worldwide degradation and the tragedy is that most people are not aware of the consequences of their actions. The intention of education at the Valley School is to raise awareness of the child to what is happening and how their actions are connected to what is going on in the world and to have love with nature and natural phenomena. By religious spirit, Krishnamurti meant a quality of innocence and communion with all things, which means natural things, physical things, human beings. A religious mind seeks to go beyond the materialistic world, to discover something immeasurable, something sacred. And by scientific mind, he meant an uncompromising commitment to the observation and understanding of facts. For Krishnamurti it was this religious quality of wholeness that alone could bring about a new culture in which the knowledge of science would find its right place.

