ENGAGING WITH MEDITATIVE INQUIRY IN ACADEMIA AND BEYOND: A CONVERSATION

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ABSTRACT. In this conversational *MJE* Forum piece, Ashwani Kumar and Bonnie Petersen discuss the importance of meditative inquiry in academia and beyond. The primary focus of the conversation is Kumar's new edited book, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts*. This book is a collection of chapters written by authors representing a wide range of perspectives, each discussing their own engagement with meditative inquiry. The conversation explores the underlying ideas behind Kumar's meditative inquiry as an approach for learning and life, and the creation of the book.

UNE CONVERSATION SUR L'ENGAGEMENT DANS UNE ENQUÊTE MÉDITATIVE, TANT DANS LE MILIEU UNIVERSITAIRE QUE PLUS LARGEMENT

RÉSUMÉ. Dans ce fil de discussion du forum de la *RSEM*, Ashwani Kumar et Bonnie Petersen évoquent l'importance de l'enquête méditative dans le milieu académique et au-delà. La conversation se concentre principalement sur le nouveau livre édité par Kumar, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts*. Cet ouvrage est une collection de chapitres rédigés par divers auteurs représentant une large gamme de perspectives, chacun partageant sa propre expérience avec l'enquête méditative. La discussion explore les idées fondamentales derrière l'approche de l'enquête méditative de Kumar, tant pour l'apprentissage que pour la vie, ainsi que le processus de création du livre en question.

INTRODUCTION BY BONNIE PETERSEN

This *MJE* Forum represents a lightly edited version of the conversation[1] I had with Dr. Ashwani Kumar. Our conversation serves as an introduction to his new book, *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* (2022).

The book is an edited collection of chapters; each chapter is written by a different author exploring their own relationship to *meditative inquiry* — "the art of understanding oneself and one's relationship to people and the world" (Kumar, 2022a, p. xix).

I should point out that I am one of Dr. Kumar's research assistants, and currently a PhD candidate at Mount Saint Vincent University (Nova Scotia, Canada) where he is a professor. When I did my MAEd at this same university, I took a course on holistic education from Dr. Kumar — just before he published his first book, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (2013). Some years later, in 2019, I did some transcription work for him, and have worked for him as a research assistant ever since. It was over this time that I became more familiar with his work on meditative inquiry and was able to see firsthand how his ideas and practices developed. I explain my history with Dr. Kumar in the interest of attesting to his sincere engagement with meditative inquiry as an approach for teaching, learning, and life.

I am a philosopher. I enjoy rumination and contemplation. I have had a deep, lifelong love for exploring and learning about the world, people, and the ways we think. And inquiry is at the heart of all exploration and learning. In order to explore, we have to be open to asking and seeking; in order to learn, we have to be open to listening and reflecting. Thus, the idea of meditative inquiry makes immediate sense to me. It fits with my ideas of the world and of people. It also fits with what I have learned from other philosophers and teachers I appreciate, such as Jiddu Krishnamurti (an interest I share with Dr. Kumar). Over the past few years, I have seen Dr. Kumar take his own initial ideas and understanding of meditative inquiry and continue to explore and develop them, applying them to his teaching, his learning, and his life. In this way, he is able to speak on this approach from his own experiences — the rough and the smooth — and one can see the evidence of it in his works.

To be clear, there is no prescribed formula behind meditative inquiry, and Dr. Kumar makes no claims on inventing one, though he has given meditative inquiry a personal character through his own inquiry and exploration. He clearly articulates this in his writing, as he does in the following conversation. For him, meditative inquiry is a self-reflective and aesthetic approach to learning and to life that is shaped differently by anyone that considers it. This is made apparent through the book under discussion here, a collection of perspectives from a broad spectrum of people, each engaging with meditative inquiry from their own frames of reference.

Engaging with Meditative Inquiry begins with a foreword by world-renowned curriculum scholar William Pinar, and an introductory chapter by Dr. Kumar. In Dr. Kumar's chapter, he explicates key principles of meditative inquiry, discussing the possibilities meditative inquiry can offer to the exploration of academic, personal, existential, social, and spiritual questions; he then outlines the goals of the book and describes its emergence, providing a summary of the core chapters. This is followed by 16 chapters written by a diverse range of scholars, each considering meditative inquiry from their own perspectives; five responses to the book itself, written by various authors well-known in their fields; and illustrations by Adam Podolski, who also contributed a reflective chapter on the process of creating the nature-based line drawings inspired by Dr. Kumar's work on meditative inquiry. The book offers contributions from scholars from a diversity of cultural backgrounds and communities, covering topics ranging from arts-based research to psychology, from Indigenous perspectives to Africentricity, and from martial arts to dispute resolution.

One of the ways Dr. Kumar has articulated meditative inquiry is as a contemplative research methodology called *dialogical meditative inquiry.* It is very apropos that this was used as the approach for developing the book — not only were the authors writing about their own experiences with meditative inquiry, they also engaged with dialogical meditative inquiry as they shaped the book, working collaboratively with each other and with Dr. Kumar to discuss and review their writing.

Our approach for the conversation was simple: I first read the book, then created 10 questions that I thought would be of interest to readers, bearing in mind the fact that our conversation would perhaps be read by many people not familiar with any aspect of Dr. Kumar's work. At his request, I did not share anything about the questions with him before our discussion. Instead, we simply entered the virtual world on Zoom and had a conversation. I believe that the conversational quality of our discussion reflects the inherent value in using dialogue and open-ended questions as a method of exploration.

CONVERSATION

BONNIE PETERSEN: To shape this conversation, Ashwani, I have prepared 10 questions for you, stemming from thoughts that arose for me while reading this book. My questions have been inspired by the book, some directly relating to meditative inquiry itself or the role meditative inquiry

plays in your life, and others sparked by ideas or concepts mentioned by some of the authors who contributed to your book.

I will begin with a question that is, perhaps, an obvious one. I realise that you have written numerous articles, chapters, and an entire book exploring this concept, but for the benefit of the readers who might be new to your work: What is meditative inquiry?

ASHWANI KUMAR: Well, you know in this new collection, I've tried to provide a little bit of an explanation about meditative inquiry right in the beginning. I tried to convey it as simply as possible and included 15 short poetic statements to give the reader the essence of what meditative inquiry is, in my view.

Before I explain what meditative inquiry is, there are a few things that I would like to point out. One is that the term "meditative inquiry" and its essence is not something that I have necessarily coined or invented. As you will see in the beginning of the book, I have invoked "Song of Creation"[2] from *Rigveda* (Jamison & Brereton, 2014) as the epigraph to the entire collection. It's a beautiful piece of poetry; it's full of spirituality and inquiry, and it's very old. But the reason I chose it is to illustrate to the readers that meditative inquiry — or the desire to understand ourselves, the desire to understand our relationships, the desire to understand the world — has existed in human beings since time immemorial. Human beings have always been curious about what life is all about and what our place is in it. That is the larger context.

The way I describe meditative inquiry is based on my studies of numerous educators and philosophers, but particularly my own existential explorations and inquiry. With meditative inquiry, it is not sufficient to read others and quote others. So it's not just an intellectual and cognitive exercise. It's a process or a way in which your whole being is involved.

The core of meditative inquiry is to live a life of awareness. I can talk a lot about it, we can engage in a long discussion about it, but basically it is to be aware of yourself, how you think, how you feel, and how you act in daily life.

In our social institutions, including educational institutions, very little emphasis is laid on understanding ourselves. There is a lot of emphasis on identity — on cultural identity, on sexual identity — but meditative inquiry calls attention to something deeper in ourselves. It demands us to be aware of our very process of thinking and the way it has been conditioned, the

way it has been constructed, the way we are programmed to look at the world in certain ways. It's a very deep exploration of oneself in relationship to other people and the environment. So, in a nutshell, I would say meditative inquiry is an exploration of oneself in relation to other people and the whole world.

And the key process that is invoked in meditative inquiry is a sense of existential awareness. I think I'll leave it at that because I think it may come up again in our conversation.

BONNIE: Okay, thank you. Now, having delved briefly into the idea of meditative inquiry, I would like to consider the book. You are the editor of this book, rather than the author. What was the inspiration for creating this collection? Did it change as it developed, shaped by the contributions of the authors, or is this how you envisaged it from the beginning?

ASHWANI: Well, I would say, in its intent and its vision, it has stayed more or less the same. Having said that, though, I was engaging with the authors and the authors were engaging with each other throughout. We adopted a collegial peer review process in which the authors discussed their writings with each other, and I was also having conversations with each author independently. So, of course, because of those exchanges, the thing that began did not remain static. Like meditative inquiry, the creation of the book was not a static process. It was a dialogical meditative inquiry that evolved itself into the book. From the very beginning, the idea I proposed was a dialogical exploration of a variety of themes and approaches in relation to my work on meditative inquiry. The authors were engaging with my work in relation to their own perspectives, and I was engaging with their work from my perspective, so it was a dialogical process and therefore it has elements of spontaneity and emergence and all that. But the vision, as I said, remained consistent.

As I very briefly described in the book, I have always been interested in meditative inquiry, in meditation, in self-exploration, and in understanding the problems of the world at a deeper existential and spiritual level. So this inquiry has been, for a long time, part of me. You could say that I have been interested in inner exploration from my teenage years when I came across the work of Indian poet Kabir. He is very prominently known in India and around the world — a very radical poet and philosopher, I would say (see Kumar & Fischer, 2021). So, the elements of meditative inquiry have continued in my life since then.

Briefly, about a year into the doctoral program, through hiccups, through challenges and difficulties, it emerged that the focus that I wanted for my doctoral research was this idea of meditative inquiry. The last sentence of my doctoral dissertation — which later became a book (Kumar, 2013) — says,

> I conclude with the hope that the readers of *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* will share their criticisms, comments, and questions to help me advance the "complicated conversation" [Pinar, 2012] that I have attempted to initiate by means of this work. (p. 129)

My hope was that the conversation with meditative inquiry would continue.

When I came to Mount Saint Vincent University, I taught a variety of courses, and, in many of them, I used part of my dissertation. In some courses, students read the whole dissertation; through that, I developed quite close relationships with many of them. Also, once the book was published (Kumar, 2013), a lot of people wrote to me from different parts of the world, sharing their thoughts on the work, how it has inspired them and influenced them. Then I wrote a conversational paper with Adrian Downey (Kumar & Downey, 2018) that was also well received.[3]

At that time, it occurred to me that, although I had been offering workshops on meditative inquiry, writing about it, engaging with students and colleagues about it, it might be good to see if there were folks who would like to engage with meditative inquiry in relation to their own work. That is, not as an independent commentary on my work, but through a dialogical engagement with meditative inquiry from their own perspective. So, that was the inspiration: to further enhance the conversation on meditative inquiry. The online conference[4] that we organized in August 2022 — focused on the meditative inquiry collection under discussion here — was a further step in continuing the dialogue and the conversation.

BONNIE: You have mentioned that, for very many years now, you have been using meditative inquiry in your life. And now, of course, you are a professor, working at a university. Historically, professors and academics have been notorious for living in ivory towers, and have been traditionally encouraged to focus on promoting themselves in what may be seen as very egocentric ways, although this may well be changing in the modern academy. Do you find it difficult to balance the constant demand for publication, teaching, and presenting — encouragement, you might say, of the individual ego that comes with striving for these goals that are a part

of your job as a professor — with the impulses of meditative inquiries such as connection, community, and letting go of these attachments?

ASHWANI: I think that's a wonderful question, Bonnie. I have explored this question in part in my dialogue with Adrian Downey (see the paper "Teaching as Meditative Inquiry" [Kumar & Downey, 2018]). And recently, I co-authored a paper with a few students in which we explored exactly these issues: how academia in many parts of the world is quite controlled by capitalist culture (Kumar et al., 2023). What you're describing are reflections of the capitalist and Eurocentric culture: the emphasis on me, the emphasis on self, the emphasis on your own progress and shamelessly promoting yourself. Even work that may appear to be done for social justice and social welfare — essentially because the system wants you to be self-centered and ego-centered — even those works may be rooted in capitalist and Eurocentric thinking, which promote emphasis on self and self-centered activities. So, because I work in the academy, I'm not free of those pressures. And I'm not free of those burdens that come upon you and force you to produce for the sake of producing. When you do that, you end up producing very low-quality work. This kind of work is mostly externally driven: You write not because you are passionate about it, but, because if you don't write, if you don't get grants, you're not going to be tenured and promoted.

So what you're describing is very important; however, the way I have dealt with this, not only in academia but throughout my life, is by giving emphasis to what I'm actually passionate about. That, of course, has had its drawbacks, and its positives, but this has proven very significant for me, that is, regardless of the outcomes, I have tried to pursue what I really want to pursue. And that's what I did in my doctoral dissertation. I was going to do something else but then I realized, no, this is not where my passion is; this is not where my heart is. And a number of people — like Bill Pinar, Anne Phelan, and Karen Meyer, these three come to mind — really encouraged me to pursue what I wanted to. They saw where I was coming from and they gave me the little push that I required to take the step — indirectly though, they were not directly doing anything — and I sensed being valued in their eyes for what my thinking was, for what I was trying to bring to the table. And so, I ended up pursuing my passion, and I continued to do that in my academic career thus far.

Of course, I had done some writings here and there which were for the sake of writing, or something that I had already completed, and it was better to get them published. But mostly, I pursued my passion for

exploring the way of meditative inquiry in teaching, learning, and living. When I became interested in music, I went wholeheartedly into learning about it, understanding it, and it led to the emergence of what I called music as meditative inquiry (Kumar & Downey, 2019). Now I'm trying to teach music to children and adults, and through teaching it, I'm learning more, and now Indian classical music has become a key focus of my research.

There was a time in my career that I was not feeling well; I was feeling isolated. I was experiencing some physical issues; I was experiencing some issues in the workplace. This affected me quite seriously, but I took the time for myself, to heal and restrengthen myself through this living process of meditative inquiry.

You know, when I say meditative inquiry, it's not a structure or a standard practice that I can give to anybody. It evolves from you, so your meditative inquiry is going to emerge from you, rather than me telling you this is what it is, "Bonnie, go and do these things for the rest of your life." So meditative inquiry emerged as a response to the experiences, the internal and the external experiences that I was having. Meditative inquiry began to transform my life, including bringing forth my serious interest in music which emerged during the difficult time I mentioned previously. So, because I took time off — I did not publish for a little while — it prepared me, it strengthened me quite a bit. And after that, when I came out of that phase, I became quite prolific, but not because of any external pressure; I had regained the desire to share my thoughts with others which should be the reason why one should write rather than due to external pressures.

So, I invited a bunch of people to have conversations with me and published very unique and different kinds of academic papers. If a BEd student reads it, they don't have difficulty, they love it. If a graduate student reads it, PhD students read it, if a professor reads it, they also find these papers interesting — these works are written in such a way that they speak to all levels. But at the same time, they are free of jargon, so they become direct communication with the audience. Did I answer your question?

BONNIE: You absolutely did, yes, thoroughly. Thank you. As you know, I'm a PhD student myself, and in the research that I'm currently doing, I've discovered — or rediscovered — that many students see the main purpose of higher education as being career related. They are involved in the very process that you were just describing. And many of them believe

that the success of a degree or a course should be judged on whether it will contribute to them getting a job, rather than whether they learn. How does using the lens of meditative inquiry shape this narrative? What do you think it might contribute to this student perspective?

ASHWANI: I would say that meditative inquiry helps me to challenge this perspective. This perspective is rooted in the capitalist culture because everybody has to pay for their education. So education is being seen as an instrumental activity: You do this in order to get that. I have a lot of discussions with my students on this topic in the class. We discuss that because we have instrumentalized education, we have reduced it to nothing. Because, in its true sense, education should be about the development of your whole being. Learning about what job you want to do, that it contributes to a career that you want to pursue or the vocation that you want to pursue, that is perfectly fine and is part of your holistic development, but in the current social and economic structures, that seems to be the *only* purpose of education.

Students in North America have to pay so much for their education. When you are paying so much money for your education, you see the university as your service provider. And the universities try to portray themselves like that. And if your professors are also your service provider, you're a client to them. So when you are buying a course — because you pay course by course — buying a degree, you go into the class, and you are sitting there as a customer. You have expectations of what you want from the professors, and when you don't get that, you definitely get very upset.

In my view, what can save academia and higher education from this capitalistic and neoliberal bombardment is professors who really care about education, who really can engage with the student to see that we all are a victim of this capitalist system. So when you are acting like a client, and you want me to act like a service producer, together we are dehumanizing each other. And together we are bringing this whole society to a very low standard of thinking, of living, and being.

I acknowledge their considerations and concerns, but rather than catering to those considerations and concerns, I engage with them in understanding the larger social and economic structures, and how they're impacting them and me. And this investigation and exploration are part of meditative inquiry. Often, as soon as people hear "meditative inquiry," they think meditative inquiry implies that you sit in a corner and you breathe in a different way. But to understand how the culture shapes you,

how the society shapes you, how systems shape you and turn you into a particular entity in accordance with those systemic, cultural, and structural demands, is part of meditative inquiry. It helps you go deeper into yourself in understanding the underlying reasons and structures of your thinking, feeling, and action.

BONNIE: I see. And now, you mentioned that some of your students are Bachelor of Education students. So you're teaching students who are learning to go out into the school system — the typical school here in Nova Scotia, say — to teach and work with young people. Do you have discussions on how they might bring meditative inquiry into their own classrooms in their role as teachers, or do you focus more on their identity as students?

ASHWANI: I do teach Bachelor of Education students, so, prospective teachers. I also teach Master of Education students, many of whom are already teachers, and I also teach doctoral students. Meditative inquiry permeates throughout everything that I do in all of my courses. My response to your question will have many layers to it.

When you are inquiring within yourself and your relationship to the society, you're developing a deeper understanding of yourself, the social structures, and the social relationships. When you have that kind of a deeper exploration, it obviously permeates all aspects of your life, including the classroom that you are teaching in. So, throughout the discussion, when I am engaging with my students, many of whom are teachers, their classroom concerns — student behaviour, student expectations, student difficulties, student engagement — all become part of the discussion. So again, it's not only an exploration of yourself but an exploration of yourself in relation to teaching, in relation to your students, in relation to your family. So their classrooms, directly or indirectly, are central to the meditative inquiry process in my classroom. I have taught a lot of courses, and in all of my courses, I engage with students in bringing meditative inquiry to their teaching, to their selves, and it definitely goes to their classroom. And also, over the past 10 years, many students have engaged with me in the classroom, and then, later on, as speakers in my classes and as speakers for a variety of university-level symposia and conferences. In these sessions, they have shared how meditative inquiry and holistic education — an education that concerns itself with the development of the body, mind, and affect rather than only emphasizing

cognitive learning — have transformed their views of teaching and learning. There are chapters in this edited collection by students who were in my classes and who have been experimenting with meditative inquiry and other holistic approaches in their classrooms.

Very recently, I created a whole course called Education as Meditative Inquiry and that course went wonderfully. It was an intensive course, composed of six all-day classes held on Saturdays over a six-week period. Throughout the week, students had time not only to reflect on themselves and what we were doing in the class, but to try certain things out in their classrooms — not instrumental techniques and methods, but something that they understood, something that spoke to them, something that they found transformative for themselves. They were so excited and keen to experiment with what they were learning in my class with their own students. In the online conference this summer, you must have noticed that there were five teachers who spoke in one panel. All of them have been in my course at one point or the other, but one of them was actually a student in the meditative inquiry course in April–May 2022, and then again in my graduate Holistic Education course in July 2022. He has been communicating with me via email and bringing to our class the reflective and creative work that his students are doing. That's really heartening. So, definitely, it's not just intellectual or academic discussion that remains confined to the text or to my classroom. It goes beyond my classroom, it goes to their lives, both outside and inside of their own classrooms.

BONNIE: I'm going to take a slightly different stance for this next question, digging a little deeper into some of the ideas in the book. Critical thinking and critical pedagogy came up throughout this book, mentioned by a number of people. There's a book by Stephen Brookfield called *The Power of Critical Theory* (2005), and in it, he describes how critical thinking and critical pedagogy can cause what he named as "radical pessimism" (p. 370) by bringing to light depressing realities of the world without necessarily providing solutions. This book we're discussing now, your edited collection, was written during the pandemic, a world crisis that focused attention on uncertainty and fear. How does meditative inquiry differ from and relate to critical theory, and what role can meditative inquiry play in addressing pessimism, uncertainty, and fear?

ASHWANI: Well, there are common elements between meditative inquiry and critical theory. In my book *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (Kumar,

2013), I talked about the differences and similarities between critical pedagogy — and I would just say critical projects of various kinds — and meditative inquiry. So, the critical project or the critical pedagogy traditions basically question the problems in social structures and social relations, particularly highlighting the problem of inequality and oppression. The response of the critical pedagogy tradition is to understand these inequalities, these oppressive structures, and bring about transformation in society through changing its social structures. So, on this point, there is no difference between meditative inquiry and critical pedagogy. The difference starts with understanding the nature of structures themselves.

It seems to me that, for critical pedagogy, structures are outside of human beings, they're independent of human beings. And if we change the structures, the human beings will change. So, I inverted the whole idea by saying that the structures are crystallized forms of human consciousness. They have emerged from human beings. Now, of course the relationship is reciprocal: Structures shape human beings, human beings shape the structures. But if you really want to know what the origin of these structures is, how the structures have come to be, we must look into the inner working of human beings who must have had some intentions, some desires, some hopes, and wishes that brought out the structures. So, if there are problems in those structures, as Krishnamurti (1983) says, they are representations or manifestations of a problem within human beings, which he calls the crisis of consciousness within human beings. If we want to change the structures, there has to be a radical change within human beings. We really need to change very deeply. So, there is an important departure, you can see, from critical pedagogy to meditative inquiry. The emphasis is more on the self. Not that you don't pay attention to the structures, that you don't critique the inequalities, or question the oppressive structures. You do all that. But you see that it all is sustained by a mass of human consciousness — mechanical, conditioned, self-centered consciousness. Unless we introduce a sense of deep awareness, deep awakening within these internal structures of our being, the external structures are very hard to change in a true sense.

I have tried to explain that through a number of examples. If you try to address racism by creating anti-racism policies, anti-racist laws, it only does so to very little extent. It only changes things superficially, it doesn't change people deep down. Deeper change can only come when somebody is willing to look within to see how they think, what they think about, and how those thoughts have entered them: Who has shaped me? Who's

controlling me? And that requires a deeper inquiry, a deeper meditative inquiry. So, this, to me, is the difference between the two.

I think meditative inquiry is very hopeful because it is not merely dependent on changing the external structures. It is bringing about a change in your microcosm: within yourself, in your relationships, in your classroom, and in your practice. It is such a microcosmic space that there is a lot of hope and possibilities if one is interested in it. And I have seen it. Over the past 10 years I have been teaching, I have seen that hope, that sense of possibility, in teachers. Often, students also ask the question, "How are we going to change the structures, how are we going to change the larger social and political structures?" But then the more we engage, the more they begin to see that by changing yourself you are changing the structures. You are part of the structures. By engaging with your students, in a very subtle, non-threatening, non-destructive way, you're bringing about changes in your microcosmic sphere. And that is connected to the macrocosmic sphere — you and the world around you are not separate from each other.

Krishnamurti says, "You are the world" (1973). A lot of people keep asking, "What does he mean?" What he means, basically, is that you are connected to everything that is happening in the world. And if there is a change within yourself, that change is going to ripple through, whether you want it to or not. Whoever you will engage with, whoever you will interact with, that change will continue to act upon, but it is a more organic, subtle, more implicit kind of a process rather than changing a policy. Not that changing policy is not important, but changing policy does not change hearts. Often, it only forces people to behave in a certain way, to become hypocritical, to develop incongruence between what they actually think and feel, and how they act.

BONNIE: There are two impulses that could be seen as being, not in opposition, but in contrast to one another that come to light in various chapters of the book that I find very interesting. This is the difference between striving and exploration. I'm going to use two examples here to give you an opportunity to elucidate. You mentioned Adrian Downey earlier. In the early part of Downey's chapter (2022, pp. 79–91), he described meditative inquiry as suggesting that striving toward a goal — in fact any striving — is in itself not to be desired. In the following chapter, Christina Flemming noted how "writing as inquiry is akin to meditative inquiry in that … both are exploratory in nature and support self-discovery" (2022, p. 93). So, these descriptions are not inherently

contradictory, but they contain what might be seen as two opposing impulses. Could you share your insight on these observations, that striving toward goals is not necessarily to be desired, while exploration and self-discovery, which could be described as goals, absolutely are?

ASHWANI: Well, first of all, these are Adrian's and Christina's own interpretations, of course, so I cannot speak to why they are interpreting in certain ways, but I can share my own insights in relation to the question that you are posing.

I think exploration is very important in life. If we are not interested in exploring what inspires us, or what interests us, then I think life is very meaningless and dull. It has no creative quality to it. But if you look around, life is an explosion of creativity, of beauty. And human beings have this intrinsic desire to learn, to understand, to explore. Often people say, "Find the techniques and methods and strategies to help children learn." But they don't understand what they are doing, on the whole — you already know what you want them to learn, and then you want to trick them, in as many ways as possible, so that they can learn what you want them to learn. But that doesn't mean that the students don't have the desire to learn, or human beings don't have the desire to learn. We all have tremendous capacity to learn and desire to learn. We all want to learn. The learning becomes burdensome, however, when it is somebody else's objectives and outcomes that you have to meet. Then it brings frustration, anger, unhappiness, and instrumentalization of education.

Exploration, I think, is intrinsic to life and to human beings, and it should be encouraged. Genuine, authentic, and organic exploration should be encouraged and emphasized in schools and in society. Striving, on the other hand, is a very different thing.

Exploration is something that you naturally are drawn to, you want to explore it, you want to understand it. Striving is when a goal has been put into your head. Or, you have been made to believe that certain things are important, and, like a hedonic cycle, once you are on it, you cannot seem to get out of it because whatever you will achieve is going to appear less if it is coming from the striving perspective. No matter how many raises you get, there is always more you could earn. No matter how many things you accomplish, there is always something else to be accomplished. So striving is something that gives you stress. It is externally driven, you are doing it to get external approvals, appreciation, and validation. While exploration, to me, is intrinsically driven. Your life is propelling you to do something.

That's how I felt with music — that it was as if the whole of life wanted me to learn it. So I embarked on that journey. But I can also turn it into a striving now. It's very easy. Ego can take over: I need to become popular. I need to get this person's approval; I need to get that person's approval. I need to perform here; I need to perform there. So, the exploration, the capacity for exploration, the desire for exploration is very natural; it exists in all of us. But society corrupts us, and so the exploration can turn into striving. I'm not saying that you should suppress your striving, because by suppressing it you're not going to understand it. So, if you see that you're striving, then you see what comes with it. Competition comes with it. Stress comes with it. Jealousy comes with it. Comparison comes with it. A sense of not being well comes with it. When you study that, through that study, the striving component of exploration can be questioned and be freed of. But if we suppress striving, then it becomes corrupt, and it becomes perverted.

You know, this is not new — Buddha, the Upanishads, and many other teachers have said that desire is the source of all problems. It is not new. But I don't think the desire to learn, the desire to understand, the desire to inquire are problematic. It is corrupted by social structures and our own egocentric tendencies.

BONNIE: Yes, interesting distinctions. Thank you. Okay, I do have one question here that is just an idea I find interesting to explore. In Adrian Downey's chapter, he states that, as far as he knows, you never directly assert what the self is (Downey, 2022, p. 81). Ashwani, what is the self?

ASHWANI: The way I look at self is not like a permanent conceptual identity. In a lot of philosophical literature, they try to pin it down, and in different religions, like in Indian religion, they have the concept of Higher Self or Supreme Self. I look at self very simply. Within yourself, when you close your eyes, or you just pay attention, so much is going on: constant movement of thoughts — thoughts that you want, thoughts that you don't want, thoughts that you want to pursue, thoughts that you want to get rid of — and constant movement of feelings — identification with those feelings, suppression of those feelings, conflict with those feelings… all this assemblage, all this constant movement within ourselves that we experience, to me that is self.

But then, the capacity to pay attention to it is something not much talked about. That capacity can also be described as self, but it's independent of

the assemblage I mentioned above. It's the awareness that we are talking about, right — the quality and the capacity to pay attention to the subjective experience that we have inside of us. So, there is the subjective experience of the movement itself, and then there is the ability to pay attention to it, that quality of awareness that can be aware of this movement. That's how I would like to differentiate. So self, to me, is very simply, whatever you experience within yourself on a daily basis: the changing thoughts and feelings, changing moods, changing behaviour, changing notion of who I am and what my contradictions are, what my conflicts are, what my joys are ... all that experiential dimension that is moving within each of us, day in and day out, is, to me, self. So it's a very existential and experiential view of self rather than a mere philosophical construct.

BONNIE: There are just two last questions I'd like to ask, and they are about action. To me, there is a very interesting sort of continuity between awareness and action, you know, this impulse that drives us. So, as you mentioned previously, meditative inquiry encourages us to look within if we wish to address the problems without. Meanwhile, using prayer and meditation as an approach to addressing crises is frequently seen as being a cop-out. You know, something terrible happens and you see politicians saying they are offering thoughts and prayers; they're replacing action with lofty philosophical concepts and what can be seen as inaction and excuses. What are your comments on this narrative or perspective and what would you say that meditative inquiry as an approach contributes to this conversation?

ASHWANI: Well, there is an element of truth in it, so first I want to acknowledge that. You see, the people, those who become interested in self-exploration, are generally spiritually minded. And often, if you see the traditions in India and also in the Western world, they escape society. Right? The serious among them become monks. They want their own salvation. To me, that is actually navel-gazing, escaping from your responsibilities, because questioning the problems in society, questioning the oppressions in society, questioning the inequalities in society is very central to living a full life, to living a meaningful life.

In the introduction to this meditative inquiry collection, I described seven principles of meditative inquiry. The first one is questioning everything without fear. The second one is critiquing social injustices. So when the

goal of my personal, spiritual inquiry is my own salvation, independent of the world that I'm living in, and its corruptions, and the problems, and the difficulties — to me that is kind of a cop-out. That is a kind of escape from the problems of the world. So that's why meditative inquiry is not a way to escape the difficulties of the world. It is a way to *understand* where those oppressions, where those inequalities, where those struggles, and wars, and difficulties are emerging from. So it's not that you are freeing yourself and creating a distance from the world. It's that you're freeing yourself because freeing yourself is the process of freeing the society, freeing the people who are around you — and not as a noble act, that "now I am free and I'm going to save people." In the very action of my inquiry, I'm helping everybody else to inquire deeper, and vice versa.

I have had dialogues with some of my close friends in India, and a friend in Canada — those conversations, those dialogues have deeply helped me understand myself. You can read the dialogues that Krishnamurti had with a number of people, but when you partake in those dialogues, you're not just listening to them or merely intellectually analyzing. When you are situated in the dialogue, when you're partaking in the dialogue, those dialogues are very helpful in your own liberation, in your own understanding. So, if meditation, prayer, whatever you want to call it, whatever name you want to give it — an existential inquiry, an urge to understand one's self, to understand the meaning of life, the depth of life — if it takes you away from, or it makes you look down upon the social conflicts and problems, to me it is a cop-out. It should give you the capacity and the intelligence to deal with the problems, not run away from them.

BONNIE: This last question I have relates very much to what you're saying now. In your work you acknowledge that the world is in crisis on many levels, due to human action and inaction. Within the approach of meditative inquiry, you suggest that the answer to these crises lies within each of us; that as we change, we help others to change. Admittedly, however, this is a very slow process, that is, to start within to solve the problems of humanity.

Considering the modern world, especially the online world which encourages impatience, a desire and expectation for immediate solutions, a belief that simplified slogans can encapsulate complex problems, and the active sowing of division and extremism, what advice do you have for people, especially for young people, regarding the use of meditative inquiry in their own lives and in responding to these types of expectations?

ASHWANI: Well, I think you put it very aptly, Bonnie. Something appears slow to us because we are impatient. Also, that we have certain expectations, and we want certain solutions. So I don't think meditative inquiry is giving you a standard solution, that if you do this, this will happen. It's an inquiry. It's not a solution, it's an inquiry. It's a process of understanding yourself and your relationships. And, if you are interested in it, I don't think time matters. Time only matters when you already know what your goal is. So, I have to become enlightened, or I have to achieve nirvana. Time is running out, right? Every day, every year, the time is running out and I'm not reaching my goal. So, this impatience … that's where the striving is coming from, right? It's the idea that you are not enough, that you are not doing enough, that you are not doing it in the right manner. It comes from having the standard already set. That is the route for impatience and measuring your understanding and inquiry in terms of time.

It is inquiry. The slow and fast, the imposition of time, is rooted in our desires, and our impatience, and what we want from it. So we want to sit quietly for 10 minutes, and we want to be free of our stresses and fears. This is rooted in our own conditioning, in our own expectations. So that's one part of it: It's neither slow nor fast, it is a process. It's an ongoing process; it's inviting people to engage with themselves and the world in a more awakened, in a more curious, and creative manner, that's one part of it.

And this is exactly what I would like to say to the youth: that society and educational institutions have robbed you of your capacity to be yourself by imposing their educational expectations on you, by imposing their expectations of success on you, by imposing their expectations of what is the right way of living. Having a bigger car, having a bigger house, they have imposed all that on you. Your task is a Herculean task. Your task is the quest to discover yourself, to understand yourself. And no social media technology is going to help you, no book is going to help you, no organizations or institutions are going to help you. What can actually help you is your own interest in understanding yourself. And if you have that real interest in you, if you have that real inquiry in you, then you will find the right people, you'll find the right books, you will find the right organizations, you will find the right friends. But it begins with you. Charity begins at home. It cannot begin with somebody else; it has to begin with you.

So it's a challenge that youth need to accept. That it is their responsibility to discover themselves. Social and educational institutions are not

interested in providing them with open space to inquire within themselves; they have never been interested in deep self-inquiry.

EPILOGUE BY BONNIE PETERSEN

As I write these concluding remarks, the conference mentioned in the conversation took place over a year ago (see Endnote 4). The conference was a great success; many of the book chapter authors took part in it, including the two authors discussed in the conversation, Christina Flemming and Adrian Downey, as well as William Pinar (author of the Foreword) and Adam Podolski (the book's illustrator), also mentioned above. As part of the conference committee, I attended all the sessions and find that it is now difficult to separate my reflections on the book from the experience of hearing the authors themselves speak about their writing, especially as many of them described the ways in which their thinking had changed since they had first written their chapters. This marking of the passage of time is interesting to consider as I find myself now in that same position, that is, reflecting on changes in my own thinking related to meditative inquiry since this conversation and the conference took place.

In the introduction above, I described myself as a philosopher, and, perhaps predictably, my love for pondering and ruminating only increases with time. I have found it very interesting to consider the difference between an inquiry and a meditative inquiry. In the intervening years since I first heard of meditative inquiry, Ashwani Kumar has been carrying on with his own explorations and inquiries, speaking and writing about his journeys. In hearing about his work with meditative inquiry relating to various topics (such as teaching, dialogue, and musical exploration), I feel I have experienced a living articulation of this difference between inquiry and meditative inquiry.

I have a particular fascination with hearing the stories of others, as it offers not only the opportunity for vicarious experience and adventure, but also the opportunity to learn new perspectives (albeit through my own subjective, listening ear). The book under discussion here offers the written stories of many people as they wrestle with their own journeys of discovery, commenting on their interaction with meditative inquiry. The conference offered many and various articulations of other such adventures through the spoken word. The book and conference have that in common: They were both created and shaped by a diverse group of individuals, each describing their own experiences in considering meditative inquiry as an approach to teaching, learning, research, and life.

My hope is that the conversation above communicates to you something akin to my own reflections after experiencing the book and conference: This is what living meditative inquiry looks like.

NOTES

1. The original recording of the conversation can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQY98iCPMIk
2. The "Song of Creation" can be accessed here: https://medium.com/@sharmaupasana/the-song-of-creation-ec9b5a0669c3
3. Kumar & Downey's (2018) article, "Teaching as Meditative Inquiry: A Dialogic Exploration," won the Outstanding Publication Award from the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies in 2019.
4. This online conference was held from August 16–18, 2022. At the time of the conversation, the conference was yet to take place. Details on the conference, including the program, speaker biographies, and abstracts can be found at https://meditativeinquiry.wixsite.com/ashwanikumar/conference

   The conference was also recorded; all videos can be found at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfVjDB_dQhEomgiYYmBJKj1nvD1oGBwaf

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