

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Editor's Preface | vii |
| Introduction | ix |
| 1 The Human Dilemma | 1 |
| 2 Unraveling Our Suffering | 25 |
| 3 Awakening from the Egoic Trance | 51 |
| 4 Letting Go of Struggle | 73 |
| 5 Experiencing the Raw Energy of Emotion | 99 |
| 6 Inner Stability | 121 |
| 7 Intimacy and Availability | 139 |
| 8 The End of Suffering | 161 |
| 9 True Autonomy | 177 |
| 10 Beyond the World of Opposites | 201 |
| 11 Falling into Grace | 221 |
| About the Author | 233 |

The Human Dilemma

WHEN I WAS a young child, about seven or eight years old, one of the things I started to notice and ponder as I watched the adults around me was that the adult world is prone to suffering, pain, and conflict. Even though I grew up in a relatively healthy household with loving parents and two sisters, and actually had quite a wonderful and happy childhood, I still saw a great deal of pain around me. As I looked at the adult world, I wondered: How is it that people come into conflict?

As a child, I also happened to be a great listener—some may even say *an eavesdropper*. I would listen to every conversation that went on in the house. In fact, it was a family joke that nothing happened in the house without me knowing about it. I liked to know everything that was going on around me, and so I spent a lot of my childhood listening to the conversations of adults, in my home and the homes of

relatives. Much of the time, I found what they talked about to be quite interesting, but I also noticed a certain ebb and flow to most of their discussions—how conversations moved into a little bit of conflict, and then sort of flowed back away from it, closer to conflict, then back away from it. Occasionally there would be an argument or hurt feelings, and people would feel misunderstood. It all felt very peculiar to me—and I really didn't understand why adults acted the way they did; the way they communicated and related with one another really baffled me. I didn't know exactly what it was that was happening, but something felt off.

BELIEVING WHAT WE THINK

As I watched and observed, day after day, week after week, month after month, even year after year, one day I had an epiphany: “Oh my gosh! Adults believe what they think! That's why they suffer! That's why they get into conflict. That's why they behave strangely, in ways that I don't understand, because they actually believe the thoughts in their head.” Now, to a little child, this was actually quite a strange notion. It was a very foreign idea to me. Of course I had ideas in my head, but when I was a child, I didn't walk around like adults do, with a running, continuous commentary going on in my mind. Basically, I was too busy having fun, or listening, or being mesmerized or amazed by some aspect of life. What I realized was that adults spent a lot of time *thinking*, and more important than that—and more odd, it seemed to me—they actually believed what they were thinking. They believed the thoughts in their head.

The Human Dilemma

All of a sudden, I had an understanding of what was happening when adults communicated with one another; that what people were in fact communicating were their thoughts, and that each person believed that what they thought was actually true. The problem was that all of the different adults had different ideas about what they thought the truth was, and so when they communicated there was this unspoken negotiation, this attempt to win each other over and to defend one's thinking and beliefs.

As I continued to observe how adults believed their thinking, it struck me, "They're insane! I understand them now: They're insane. It's insane to believe the thoughts in your head." In a strange way, to discover this as a child was quite a relief. It was a relief to at least begin to understand this strange world of adults, even though it didn't make much sense to me.

In sharing this experience over the years, I've learned that many others remember a similar insight when they were young, of the insanity of the adult world. Rather than providing a sense of relief, however, this insight causes many children to begin to question themselves, wondering if there is something wrong with them. It is a frightening experience for us as children to think that the adults we depend on for our survival, care, and love may actually be insane.

THE DILEMMA OF HUMAN SUFFERING

For me, for some reason that I don't really understand, this insight did not cause me to fear the adult world. Instead, it was actually a great relief that I could at least understand why

they were doing what they were doing. Without knowing it, I was actually gaining my first insight into one of the great dilemmas of being a human being: the cause of human suffering. This is something the Buddha questioned over 2,500 years ago: What is the cause of suffering in the human being?

When any of us looks out into the world, of course we can see unimaginable beauty and mystery. There are many things to appreciate and be in awe of, but we can't really look out at the human world without acknowledging that there is also a great amount of suffering and discontent. There is a great amount of violence, hate, ignorance, and greed. Why is it that we human beings seem to be so prone to suffering? Why is it that we seem to hold onto it as if it was a very important possession?

Having grown up around dogs and cats, one of the things I noticed is that a dog could get upset with you—it could get resentful and disappointed; it could get its feelings hurt—but within minutes, or even sometimes seconds, the dog would just slough it off. It could put down its suffering and return back to its natural state of happiness in a very short period of time. I wondered, “Why is it that human beings have such a difficult time putting their suffering down? What’s the reason that we often carry it around, when it becomes such a burden to us?” In some way, many people’s lives are defined by the events that have caused them to suffer, and many are suffering over events that occurred long, long ago. These events are no longer happening, yet they are still being lived, in a sense, and the suffering is still being experienced. What is going on here?

The Human Dilemma

This insight I had as a child, even though I didn't know how significant it was at the time, was the beginning of my understanding as to why it is that we suffer. It became very clear that one of the primary reasons we suffer is because we believe what we think, that the thoughts in our heads come uninvited into our consciousness, swirl around, and we attach to them. We identify with them and grab hold of them. This insight that I had as a child was much more significant than I realized. It took me many years, probably a good couple of decades, to realize that what I'd seen as a child struck at the root of why we actually suffer, that one of the greatest reasons that we suffer is because we believe the thoughts in our head.

Why is it that we do this? Why do we believe the thoughts in our head? We don't believe the thoughts in someone else's head, when they speak them to us. When we read a book—which is nothing but the recording of somebody else's thoughts—we can take them or leave them. But why is it that we are so prone to grasp at the thoughts that occur within our own mind—to hold onto them and become identified with them? We don't seem to be able to put them down even when they cause great pain and suffering.

THE SHADOW SIDE OF LANGUAGE

Much of our programming to believe our thoughts begins with our education and with the very natural process we all go through when we learn language. To a child, language is a great discovery. It's an amazing thing to be able to name

something. It's highly advantageous to be able to point toward something and say, "That's what I want!" "I want a drink of water." "I want some food." "I want to have my diaper changed." It's a wonderful breakthrough when we first discover and begin to utilize language.

One of the most powerful pieces of language that we come upon when we're young is our own name, when we realize that we have a name. I remember this moment of realization in my own life. I used to just repeat my name over and over in my head, because it was so fun to do. It was a great discovery. "Oh! This is who I am!"

As we grow up, most of us have a certain infatuation with language. Language becomes quite useful in communicating amazing things, a powerful tool for sharing our experience and moving through life. As we age, it becomes a way for us to express great creativity and intelligence. But language also has a shadow side, as does everything. Thought, too, has a shadow side, and it's the shadow side of thought that we are uneducated about. Nobody tells us that to believe the thoughts in our minds might be a very dangerous thing to do. What we're taught is just the opposite. We're actually programmed as we grow up—by our parents, by the world around us, by each other—very much like a computer. We are taught to think in terms of absolutes. Something is either one way or the other, right or wrong, black or white. This programming thus affects the way we think and the way we perceive the world. Is it blue? Is it red? Is it big? Is it tall?

The great spiritual teacher Krishnamurti once said, "When you teach a child that a bird is named 'bird,' the

The Human Dilemma

child will never see the bird again.” What they’ll see is the word “bird.” That’s what they’ll see and feel, and when they look up in the sky and see that strange, winged being take flight, they’ll forget that what is actually there is a great mystery. They’ll forget that they really don’t know what it is. They’ll forget that that thing flying through the sky is beyond all words, that it’s an expression of the immensity of life. It’s actually an extraordinary and wondrous thing that flies through the sky. But as soon as we name it, we think we know what it is. We see “bird,” and we almost discount it. A “bird,” “cat,” “dog,” “human,” “cup,” “chair,” “house,” “forest”—all of these things have been given names, and all of these things lose some of their natural aliveness once we name them. Of course we need to learn these names and form concepts around them, but if we start to believe that these names and all of the concepts we form around them are real, then we’ve begun the journey of becoming entranced by the world of ideas.

The capacity to think and utilize language has a shadow side that, if left unattended and used in an unwise way, can cause us to suffer and experience unnecessary conflict with one other. Because after all, that’s what thought does: It separates. It classifies. It names. It divides. It explains. Again, thought and language have a very useful aspect and they are therefore very necessary things to develop. Evolution has worked very hard to make sure that we have the capacity to think coherently and rationally, or, in other words, to think in ways that will ensure our survival. But when we look back

upon the world, we see that the very thing that has evolved to help us survive has also become a form of imprisonment for us. We've become trapped in a world of dreams, a world in which we live primarily in our minds.

This is the dream world that is addressed by many ancient spiritual teachings. When many of the old saints and sages say, "Your world is a dream. You're living in an illusion," they're referring to this world of the mind and the way we believe our thoughts about reality. When we see the world through our thoughts, we stop experiencing life as it really is and others as they really are. When I have a thought about you, that's something I've created. I've turned you into an idea. In a certain sense, if I have an idea about you that I believe, I've degraded you. I've made you into something very small. This is the way of human beings, this is what we do to each other.

To genuinely understand the cause of suffering and our potential release and freedom from it, we have to look very closely at this root of human suffering: When we believe what we think, when we take our thinking to be reality, we will suffer. It's not obvious until you look at it, but when we believe our thoughts, in that instant, we begin to live in the world of dreams, where the mind conceptualizes an entire world that doesn't actually exist anywhere but in the mind itself. At that moment, we begin to experience a sense of isolation, where we no longer feel connected to each other in a very rich and human way, but we find ourselves receding more and more into the world of our minds, into the world of our own creation.

COMING OUT OF THE MATRIX OF SUFFERING

So what's the way out? How do we avoid becoming lost in our own thoughts, projections, beliefs, and opinions? How do we begin to find our way out of this whole matrix of suffering?

To begin with, we have to make a simple, yet very powerful observation: All thoughts—good thoughts, bad thoughts, lovely thoughts, evil thoughts—occur *within* something. All thoughts arise and disappear into a vast space. If you watch your mind, you'll see that a thought simply occurs on its own—it arises without any intention on your part. In response to this, we're taught to grab and identify with them. But if we can, just for a moment, relinquish this anxious tendency to grab our thoughts, we begin to notice something very profound: that thoughts arise and play out, spontaneously and on their own, within a vast space; the noisy mind actually occurs within a very, very deep sense of quiet.

This may not be apparent on first observation, because we're used to thinking of silence and quiet in terms of the exterior environment: Is my home quiet? Has the neighbor's dog stopped barking? Is the TV turned off? Or we tend to think of quiet in internal terms: Is my mind noisy? Have my emotions calmed down? Do I feel settled? But the silence or quiet I'm talking about is not a relative silence. It's not an absence of noise, even of mental noise. Rather, it's about beginning to notice that there is a silence that is always present, and that noise happens within this silence—even the noise of the mind. You can start to see that every thought arises against the backdrop of absolute silence.

Thought arises literally within a thoughtless world—each idea appears in a vast space.

As we continue to look at the nature of thought, and in particular what or who it is that is aware of thought occurring, most of us are quite convinced, “Well, I’m the one that notices thought.” This is what we’ve been taught and what we naturally assume—that “you” and “me,” as separate individuals, are the ones who “think” our thoughts. Who else would be thinking them? But if you look closely, you’ll realize that it’s not actually true that *you* are the one thinking. Thinking simply happens. It happens whether you want it to or not, and it stops whether you want it to or not. As you start to see this process, it can be quite a shock that your mind just thinks on its own, and it stops on its own. If you stop trying to control your mind, you begin to notice that thought occurs in a very vast space. This is an extraordinary discovery, because it begins to show us that there is something present that is other than thought, and that we aren’t just the next thought that we have in our minds.

When we believe in our thoughts, when we believe at the deepest level that they in fact are equal to reality, we can start to see how this leads directly to frustration, discontent, and ultimately to suffering on many levels. This realization is the first step in unraveling our suffering. There is something else, however, which needs to be seen—something even more fundamental. This deeper realization comes long after we’ve formed our opinions, our beliefs, and our capacity to conceptualize. Why is it that, even when we