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## A 'Pathless Land' of compassion: An ethical perspective of Jiddu Krishnamurti and Zen Kōans

### SUMMARY

The connection between the metaphysics of the self and ethics is often relegated to the margins in the mainstream philosophies. Be it the empiricists following Hume concerning the gulf between the "is-ought" judgments or contemporary analytic philosophers who agree with G. E. Moore's notion of the "naturalistic fallacy." In this article, we focus on the relationship between the metaphysics of the self and its implications for ethics, particularly a bioethical perspective on the mental well-being of human beings in terms of compassion, empathy and love. Such a perspective has the potential of self-transformation by using the tools of Philosophical Counselling in tune with Krishnamurti's insights and dialogues of Zen Kōans. Can we speak about empathy as a path or empathy as a goal? Also, can we speak about self-compassion and compassion for others as being separated or divided? The response lies beyond dualism, beyond categories that we are used to, that we are trained to see. Through the exploration of Krishnamurti's insights on thought, memory, knowledge and experience, which show that these are always limited and therefore bring division and conflict, and then Zen Kōans as a dialogue between the master and a disciple(s), where disciple(s) should get freed from the ideas, forms, and all that is created by thought, we arrive at the place where duality ends. And where duality ends, there dwells empathy, love and compassion opening up possibilities for self-transformation through philosophising.

**Keywords:** compassion, empathy, love, thought, metaphysics of the self, well-being, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Zen Kōans.

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## INTRODUCTION

The connection between the metaphysics of the self and ethics is often relegated to the margins in the mainstream philosophies. Be it the empiricists following Hume about the gulf between the “is-ought” judgments or contemporary analytic philosophers who agree with G. E. Moore’s notion of the “naturalistic fallacy.” For Hume, the very notion of a ‘self’ is a chimaera (Penelhum, 1976, pp. 9-10). Moreover, according to Hume, one cannot legitimately derive an ‘ought’ judgment concerning values from a judgment solely about ‘facts.’ In other words, some values must be presupposed before making value judgments. G. E. Moore, elaborating on the naturalistic fallacy, poses the ‘open question’ argument and points out that ethical judgments like “X is good” cannot be about any natural properties that X possesses as the notion of ‘good’ is an unanalysable simple notion (Moore, 1903, pp. 6-10). Both these views made the relation between facts and values problematic and resulted in metaethical theories that dispense with the very notion of a cogent self as the source of our moral concerns. A contemporary philosopher, Sam Harris, understands the human brain as “an engine of belief” and argues that the gap between facts and values is bridgeable through beliefs (Harris, 2010, p. 14). Many recent studies defend a neurobiological basis of values (see Kavanagh et al., 2024).

The above philosophical positions necessitate a transcendental inquiry of the self. As pointed out by Sami Pihlström, human subjectivity must reflexively turn towards itself in order to examine its own capacities and limits. “We pragmatically need the notion of the transcendental self in order to understand ourselves as human beings” (Pihlström, 2016, p. 217). The notion of self for Krishnamurti and Zen Kōans are not to be understood in the sense of an enduring substance, but one that is reflective and as a transcendental source of our values such as love and compassion thereby making an integral connection between the metaphysics of self and ethics.

In this article, we wish to emphasize the relation between the metaphysics of the self and its implications for ethics, particularly a bioethical perspective on the mental well-being of human beings in terms of “compassion,” “empathy,” and “love” as enunciated by the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti as well as the wisdom embodied in the Zen Kōans. The recent Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme points out the paradox that at a time when humankind has achieved greater progress in technology and higher human development resulting in material well-being, the mental well-being of individuals has been on a steady course of decline over the last decade (United Nations Development Programme, 2024, p. 41). We believe Philosophical Counselling based on the insights of Krishnamurti and Zen Buddhism can bring personal transformation conducive to mental well-being.

According to Achim Steiner, “We face “a global gridlock,” exacerbated by a growing polarization within our countries, which translates into barriers to international cooperation” (United Nations Development Programme, 2024, p. v). Of course, to address this problem, we have to pay attention to both the material resources of nations and individuals, as well as the mental well-being of humans. How do we break the “global gridlock” that we are stuck with at the level of individuals? Can we speak about empathy as a path or empathy as a goal? Also, can we speak about self-compassion and compassion for others as being separated, or divided? The response lies beyond dualism, beyond categories that we are used to and trained to see. Through the exploration of Krishnamurti’s insights on thought, memory, knowledge and experience, which shows that these are always limited and therefore brings division and conflict, and then Zen Kōans as a dialogue between the master and a disciple(s), where disciple(s) should get freed from the ideas, forms, and all that is created by thought, we reach to the place where duality ends. And where duality ends, there dwells compassion, empathy and love which are the prerequisites to break the grid-lock at the level of the individuals.

Jiddu Krishnamurti’s insights are very important because of his profound understanding of what is ‘thought’ on the one hand and what is love, compassion, and meditation on the other hand. This can give a wonderful window to the topics we are currently exploring. We have also chosen Zen Kōans or Zen stories, which are in the form of a dialogue between a master and a disciple(s) - *mondo* (question and answer), where disciple(s) should get freed from the ideas, forms, and all that is created by thought. Both Krishnamurti and Zen Buddhism find representational thinking in terms of concepts/words inadequate to capture the reality. Rather, what they point out is an experiential way of understanding that results in self-awareness through meditation, compassion and empathy<sup>1</sup>.

## JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI ON THOUGHT AND LOVE

We shall first dwell on Jiddu Krishnamurti’s exploration of thought. “Thought is a response to memory” (Moffatt, 1976, p. 13). Memory is based on knowledge, and knowledge is based on experience - experiencing something, recollecting, remembering, and holding. We cannot have all the knowledge of the world. The experience is also limited, as we can never experience all there is. Therefore, all must always be “limited” - experience, knowledge, memory, and thought.

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<sup>1</sup> In Continental Philosophy, Nietzsche and Heidegger have drawn our attention to the limitations of conceptual thinking and point out the possibilities of a ‘poetical thinking.’ Deleuze while agreeing with Heidegger, nonetheless explores alternate ways of thinking attuned to imagination and intuition. See in this regard, “The Limits of Conceptual Thinking” (Bernet, 2014, pp. 219-241).

Thought always operates from the past, experience has already passed; thought recollect experience and then project the idea of the future, of what might happen. And from there, we react. We are always in the past or in the future, never in the now. And in that lies division - as one can have an idea of another, not actually seeing what is. Projection of the future, which is never now, is something based on the past and, therefore, not real. Let's take an example from the book *Krishnamurti and Psychotherapy: Beyond East and West*:

If I have an image about you and you have an image about me, naturally we do not see each other at all as we actually are. What we see are the images we have formed about each other which prevents us from being in contact, which keeps us separate. (Moffatt, 1976, p. 11)

We can never have complete knowledge about something that is alive, moving, and changing. We can have it when the change is done. That implies we are always approaching from the past, which is no more; it is dead. In that lies division. And the division is a conflict. If thought is in itself limited, if it is always in the past, projecting the future, it is always bringing a division. The thought had created religious, national, and all other divisions. Divided us into Germans, Hindus, Americans, Koreans, and so on. Thought can never see the whole.

One should observe this inwardly and psychologically. To observe the rise of the thought, to give its total attention, without the movement, without judging, liking, disliking, trying to change what is, just to stay with it. Krishnamurti compares the arising of thought with the blossoming of the flower that flourishes and then naturally fades and withers. Same with the thought. If one observes, without movement, without escaping it, or without imposing another idea on it, one will see this truth about how thought arises, its origin, and how it creates conflict.

By being alert, "choicelessly aware,"<sup>2</sup> transformation happens, and it is in the now; it is instant. And one is therefore free. "Freedom comes when I see and act immediately; the seeing is the acting. Freedom is not revolt because when I revolt it is a reaction, and that reaction sets up its own pattern and then I get caught in that pattern" (Moffatt, 1976, p. 14). In this awareness, there is no recollection, no 'scar' which will be in some other situation that same past from where we react. This is meditation for Krishnamurti. Meditation means to ponder over, to stay, and to observe. "To observe, not correct, not transcend, not run away from or suppress, but observe" (Krishnamurti, 1984, p. 57). That observation is in now, fresh, ever new. "The observer

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<sup>2</sup> 'Choiceless awareness' is a syntagm that Krishnamurti often uses. "Choice implied direction, the action of the will. What K [Krishnamurti] was talking about was awareness from moment to moment of all that was taking place inside oneself without any effort to direct or change it—a matter of pure observation, perception, which would result in change without effort" (Lutyens, 1983, p. 34).

is the observed” (Krishnamurti, 1999, p. 23). Meditation is not sitting in some special position, breathing, or any kind of exercise, but it is this awareness and watchfulness of what is. “Meditation is to be aware of every thought and feeling, never to say it is right or wrong, but just to watch it and move with it. In that watching I can see the totality of myself in an instant” (Moffatt, 1976, p. 19). When that awareness is there, inwardly and outwardly are no longer separated. The dualism stops. And in that, one can be totally aware of the whole field of consciousness, not just about a fragment or some intellectualization, some part created by the mind.

Is there something that is beyond thought, beyond the structure of thought? Does love lie beyond thought? What is compassion and empathy in relation to thought and love? What is love? Krishnamurti is taking us through what is not love.<sup>3</sup> Love is not pleasure; it is not mere sensation, fulfilment, attachment, dependence, calculation, or any kind of self-interest. Love has nothing to do with the thought. Where there is thought, there is no love. Love is completely different from thought. When one is in constant struggle, when one is seeking pleasure through sensation, or when there is self-interest, there cannot be love.

One cannot explore what love is from the idea of what thought has been made of it, be it “love,” “compassion,” or “empathy.” Because then it becomes just another projection of the thought. It is an observation that will by itself bring the answer. When one sees this, through meditation, there is a release of the tremendous energy, which was once used in conflict.<sup>4</sup> When it is released, that energy becomes passion. That passion is the base for compassion. It is the base for discovering what is. Krishnamurti states that love is the highest form of compassion. Empathy is the outcome of love. Love, compassion or empathy are all in the same realm, but as language creates duality, we talk about them as seemingly separate. This insight is fresh, new; therefore, it is pathless and patternless. It is organic. There is no mechanism. As it cannot be done by repetition, there is no authority, and it has to be done by oneself. Awareness is always fresh.

## ZEN KŌANS AND THE GREAT COMPASSION

Zen Sect of Buddhism does not have a doctrine to believe in, nor has it a formulated philosophy, as it does not have anything to say. And it does not have anything to say

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<sup>3</sup> This can be compared and captured in the idea of the *Vedic* analysis of negation, which Sankaracharya (the well-known *Advaitin*) uses - *Neti, neti* (Not this, not this). Through this method one who is inquiring - *Jnani* - is negating all that is not Self (*Atman*) and therefore all that is not *Brahman*, as for *Advaitins* (those who follow *Advaita Vedanta*) *Atman* is *Brahman*. Krishnamurti does not use it as an idea, but as the actuality he is having insight into, an alive inquiry.

<sup>4</sup> Conflict is using a lot of our energy and strength. It is the identities we sustain that result in conflict, the past thus interrupts the present. When there is the observation of it, conflict ends and in ending conflict, all energy is.

because the one who reached *Satori* – “seeing into one’s self-nature” (Abe, 1967, p. 60), instant awakening, or a brief moment of enlightenment - knows there is nothing to teach, everything is already there, it is obvious and there is nothing to be given as the teaching. Zen in Japanese or *Ch’an* in the Chinese language, can open and transform mountains (Heine, 2002, p. xiii). To do this inquiry is not easy, especially with words, what we are doing now, so one has to be careful, alert and aware of the duality of the words because we can easily slip into the frame of what is already known.

Zen Kōan is a story written as a dialogue between the master and a disciple(s) called *mondo* which is a form of question and answer. But very different dialogue than we are used to. They are part of the process where disciple(s) should get freed from the ideas, forms, and all that is created by thought, and it is there to shake their world so one can see the reality as it is, not through concepts and ideas. “The interplay enables the exchange partner to immediately discern and uproot the causes of his ignorance and to spontaneously gain insight into the true nature of reality beyond ordinary logic or language” (Heine, 2014, p. 1). Kōans, clear, sharp as a diamond, can trigger an instant awakening “...that is like the sun bursting through the clouds on a dreary day or a hammer smashing through solid rock” (Heine, 2014, p. 2). That is enlightenment. It is an extraordinary way; it is extraordinary dialogue, where the point is not reaching a conclusion, but the opposite, dissolving the idea of a conclusion, reaching the silence, where the realization that all is already here. Zen is “like a red-hot iron ball which you have gulped down and which you try to vomit, but cannot” (Blyth, 1966, p. 22).

One of the most known collections of Kōans is *The Gateless Gate*, also called *The Gateless Barrier*, a collection of 48 Zen Kōans, (there is one more added at the end, composed by Anwan, which makes it 49 in the classical edition) collected in the 13th century by Wumen (Mumonkan), with his comments and poems after every story - all this goes together, it is not separated, and the comment and poem is in itself a new Kōan. Disciples are asking questions and the master is responding: “A monk once asked Jōshū, “Has a dog the Buddha-Nature?” Jōshū answered, “*Mu!*” (No)” (Blyth, 1966, p. 22). *Mu* means No or Nothing, but in this case, it is just a sound.

Zen Kōans make the readers or explorers of Zen ultimately confused, when they understand that all gathered knowledge and logic on which they function in regular everydayness, they cannot use to understand the words in Zen Kōan. Those words look like some unfamiliar language or almost like being just thrown there. “Zen is properly concerned with the very origin before duality takes place” (Abe, 1967, p. 60). And words create duality. Thus, *The Gateless Gate* should leave the reader with no thought, because no thought can ever understand the nature of Buddha, the Buddhahood. Only in silence can that happen. This dialogue of master and

disciple(s) shows us the absurdity of thought, and it is why this dialogue takes us to thoughtlessness, which is silence in its origin.

At the beginning of *The Gateless Gate*, Mumonkan wrote a comment:

For the practical study of Zen, you must pass the barriers set up by the masters of Zen. The attainment of this mysterious illumination means cutting off the workings of the ordinary mind completely. ... Now what is this barrier? It is simply “Mu,” the Barrier of the Gate of Zen ... Those who have passed the barrier are able not only to have an intimate understanding of Jōshū, but also of the whole historic line of Zen Masters, to walk hand in hand with them, and to enter into the closest relation with them. You see everything with the same eye that they saw with, hear everything with the same ear. Is not this a blessed condition? Wouldn't you like to pass this barrier? Then concentrate your whole body, ... into this Question; ... hold it before you. But do not take it as nothingness, nor as the relative “not,” of “is” and “is not.” ... All the useless knowledge, ... throw them away! After a certain period of time, this striving will come to fruition naturally, in a state of internal and external unity. As with a dumb man who has had a dream, you will know it yourself, and for yourself only. Suddenly your whole activity is put into motion and you can astonish the heavens above and shake the earth beneath. ... You meet a Buddha? You kill him! A master of Zen? You kill him! Though you stand on the brink of life and death, you have the Great Freedom. (Blyth, 1966, pp. 31-32)

In this comment on the first Kōan, the Great Compassion (*Karuṇā*) and the Great Wisdom (*Prajña*) are given to us. “What makes Zen as such is that various *upāya* (good devices for salvation) naturally come out of the Great Compassion with the quickness of the echo following a sound. In Zen, properly speaking, *prajña* and *karuṇā* are not two but one” (Abe, 1967, p. 66). This brings us to the other aspect of Kōans and thoughtlessness, except being freed from ideas and concepts. It is related to the cause of action or/and reaction. We are mostly in the realm of thoughts, where we discuss actions - are they good or not, should we do something or not, but rarely we understand and consider the cause, from where the action is coming. Is it coming as a reaction to our past experiences which we carry with us unsolved? Can it be fresh, in now, coming from the silence of the mind? When Kōan breaks the known, ideas and concepts from the past which dictate our action or/and reaction, in that silence, rises the Great Compassion and Great Wisdom as not being separated.

Zen Buddhism is a school of Mahayana Buddhism, where the greatest importance is given to the achievement of Buddha's wisdom and powers to help all beings, which means liberation of all beings. In that itself lies the Great Compassion and empathy. “One can be rightly called “The true Man of no rank” when in him the Great Wisdom is backed up by the Great Compassion and the Great Compassion is backed up by the Great Wisdom” (Abe, 1967, p. 66).



## KRISHNAMURTI, ZEN AND PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

Seeing the insights of Krishnamurti and the wisdom of Zen Kōans, not merely intellectually, but actually,<sup>5</sup> we can approach the question of philosophical counselling and the role of one who is engaged in it. We can help another to understand and realize that this total revolution that Krishnamurti is speaking about is possible. Counsellors cannot bring that revolution to another, but it can be there as a mirror. “Serving as a mirror implies two things: first, the therapist has what Maslow calls Taoistic objectivity; second, the therapist is in some form of a transcending state” (Moffatt, 1976, p. 44). Zen Kōans or Krishnamurti’s words also serve as a mirror. And that mirror allows us choiceless awareness of thoughts, of the rise of thoughts, the origin, and its implications, without judging it or imposing the opposite to it. The self-transformative potential of Krishnamurti’s philosophy resonates with the idea of philosophical counselling as championed by Ran Lahav among others (Baniwal & Chaudhary, 2021, p. 2645).

As there are counsellors who are helping people with problems, frustrations and other unmet needs, there is a great need for “...meta-counselors to help with the soul-sickness that grows from unfulfilled meta-needs” (Moffatt, 1976, p. 42). Karl Jung calls for the awakening of one’s inner spirit.

To interfere with the life of things means to harm both them and one’s self. He who imposes himself has the small manifest might; he who does not impose himself has the great secret might... The perfected man does not interfere in the life of beings, he does not impose himself on them, but he helps all beings to their freedom. (Moffatt, 1976, p. 36)

From this, we may note that although both traditional counselling and what Tillmanns calls ‘philosophical counselling’ are grounded in a dialogical quest, philosophical counselling differs from traditional counselling.

...[In] traditional counselling [...] counsellors will listen to their clients through relatively fixed structures of thought such as DSM IV, for instance. Philosophers are more interested in the whole story, as a story, as an eyewitness account of life. What does this person’s account tell us about life? For the philosophical counsellor, the emphasis is on life as lived as opposed to the self. (Tillmanns, 2005, p. 4)

In other words, as the later Wittgenstein points out, philosophy is “therapeutic.” Philosophy simply puts everything before us as it is, and then there is nothing more to explain. It is like releasing us from the conceptual maze that we got into through the “bewitchment of our intellect by means of language” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p.

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<sup>5</sup> Krishnamurti is often bringing us to the actuality of what is, away from mere intellectual concepts.



47<sup>c</sup>). The purpose of philosophy, according to Wittgenstein's later philosophy, is "To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 103<sup>^</sup>).

More specifically,

Philosophy and Philosophical counselling start with everyday experiences that engender puzzlement, surprise, and wonder. Puzzlement, surprise and wonder speak to the person as a whole being and not just to her intellect. Philosophical counseling tries to bring back together mind and body which have been severed during the time of modernity. (Tillmanns, 2005, p. 7)

Thus, we may see that Krishnamurti, in his dialogical encounters as well as the Zen masters through the Kōans, are engaged with philosophizing as counselling, a process that touches the whole being of us.

## CONCLUSION

This paper explores 'thought' as obstacle to "passing" through the Gateless Gate. If we start exploring love, compassion, and empathy with thought, we will just invent new concepts, new patterns, and new ideals, which we project but do not actually investigate as what is. Thought is projecting; therefore, it will also find what it is projecting and declare it as truth. But for the truth, one has to ask open questions. To allow not to know the response "one should adopt a questioning mind, not a limited activity but a resolute inner position" (Tubali, 2023, p. 208). The dialogue that Krishnamurti has with the audience or with just one person "...seems strikingly similar to Socrates' and the Zen masters' stance that *aporía* is the necessary starting point of the true quest for wisdom" (Tubali, 2023, p. 209). The response cannot come from the gathered knowledge, memory, or thought that is in the past. It can only come through observation, and awareness first of what is. Raising questions, without the movement to answer them, as open questions, is the highest form of intelligence. It is like a child who sees a toy for the first time, observes it from all angles, and wonders about it.

Often, we talk about love in our age as self-love, i.e., love for oneself and love for another, being separate and distinct. As if they are exclusive, or as if they can exist separately. That is in the realm of the thought, which is again making a division between self-love and love for others. Rather, love just is. For example, there is no helping others or helping oneself; there is just an act of helping. Miro Jakovljević (2024) points out that there is no mental health without physical health and vice

versa.<sup>6</sup> We should start seeing things holistically, that there is no division between mental or physical health. Man/Woman is a whole Being. There is just health. Seeing what is, the reality of what is, first of all about oneself, having a look at oneself, brings the most sane, healthy life, as its natural outcome. Thus, the metaphysics of self as an undivided, not fragmented being, that is organic, as pointed out by Krishnamurti or as the Zen Kōans, show us that by extinguishing all thoughts of the ordinary minds, we can lead a life embodying the great compassion and love. From this perspective our whole ethical beingness is grounded in empathy, love and compassion. Here we may emphasise that our ethical values derive its source from the “transcendental self” as espoused at the beginning of this article. We also point out that one must go beyond the mind, for which no examples will ever be sufficient because all examples and language will lead to duality. Philosophical Counselling after Krishnamurti and Zen Buddhism is to realize our lives experientially, not conceptually, in terms of love and compassion. Such a life will be an appropriate response to foster the well-being of humanity even when we engage in the daily chores of our lives.

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## Suosjećanje kao 'zemlja bez staza': Etički osvrt na Jiddua Krishnamurtija i Zen Koane

### SAŽETAK

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Povezanost između metafizike sebstva i etike često se marginalizira u dominantnim filozofskim pravcima, bilo da je riječ o empiristima koji slijede Humea i njegovo viđenje jaza između činjeničnih i vrijednosnih sudova ("is-ought"), ili suvremenim analitičkim filozofima koji prihvaćaju Mooreovu ideju "naturalističke pogreške." U ovom radu usredotočujemo se na odnos između metafizike sebstva i njezinih implikacija za etiku, posebice bioetičku perspektivu mentalnog blagostanja ljudskih bića u terminima suosjećanja, empatije i ljubavi. Takva perspektiva otvara mogućnost samotransformacije pomoću alata filozofskog savjetovanja, usklađenog s uvidima Krishnamurtija i dijalozima prisutnima u Zen koanima. Možemo li govoriti o empatiji kao putu ili kao cilju? Također, možemo li govoriti o samosuosjećanju i suosjećanju prema drugima kao nečemu odvojenom ili podijeljenom? Odgovor leži izvan granica dualizma, izvan kategorija koje poznajemo i unutar kojih smo naučeni razmišljati. Kroz istraživanje Krishnamurtijevih uvida o misli, sjećanju, znanju i iskustvu, koji otkrivaju da su svi ti aspekti uvijek ograničeni i da stoga rezultiraju podjelom i sukobom, te kroz ispitivanje Zen koanima kao dijaloga između učitelja i učenika, u kojem je učenik vođen ka oslobođanju od ideja, oblika i svega što je stvoreno mišlju, dolazimo do točke u kojoj dualnost iščezava. A gdje dualnost prestaje, ondje se otkriva prisutnost empatije, ljubavi i suosjećanja. čime se otvara put prema samotransformaciji kroz filozofsko promišljanje.

**Ključne riječi:** suosjećanje, empatija, ljubav, misao, metafizika sebstva, blagostanje, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Zen koani.