



# Why did Bohm Collaborate with Krishnamurti?

## Some Reminiscences and Reflections

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*This article is adapted from a talk the author gave in London on June 24 at the Bohm/Prigogine centennial celebration conference. It is based upon his recent book, **An Uncommon Collaboration: David Bohm and J. Krishnamurti**. Both David Bohm and Ilya Prigogine were honorary members of the SMN. The article gives a unique insight into the relationship between the two men by someone who knew them both well.*

### Background

David Bohm was 43 years old when he met Krishnamurti, and Krishnamurti was 66. The year was 1961, and their work together continued for a quarter of a century, until Krishnamurti died in 1986. During those 25 years, the two men participated together in 144 recorded dialogues. Many of these were with various groups of people, but there were 30 recorded conversations consisting of just the two men talking together. These were published in a series of books, including *Truth and Actuality*, *The Ending of Time*, *The Limits of Thought*, and *The Future of Humanity*.

Many of Bohm's colleagues in the scientific world held a somewhat negative or disparaging attitude toward his involvement with Krishnamurti's work, and, on the surface of events, one can understand why. To someone not familiar with Krishnamurti's actual philosophy, it might appear that he was an unscientific individual, probably some kind of mystic or the leader of a cult. His name alone would have evoked associations with Maharishi, or Yogananda, or perhaps someone who made substances materialise by rubbing his fingers together. In addition to his name, Krishnamurti had a close affiliation in his youth with the Theosophical Society. That organisation raised him from the age of 14 and cultivated him to become an important spiritual teacher. But the Theosophical Society had a strongly esoteric or occult component, which probably reinforced or cemented in the minds of some people the image of a guru offering platitudes to a credulous cult of followers.

But if one looks underneath the surface, the reality of Bohm's relationship with Krishnamurti was very different. The most important difference is that the image of Krishnamurti as a cult figure is completely divorced from who he actually was. Early in his career, more than 30 years before he met David Bohm, Krishnamurti categorically separated himself from his theosophical roots, and he made it a central pillar of his philosophy not to encourage or develop any sense of authority in psychological or religious matters. He emphasised repeatedly that he was not a guru, not a leader, not an authority, and that he did not want to create any kind of organisation to join or any sense of belonging to a special group of followers. On the contrary, "Be a light to yourself" was one of his most frequent and familiar refrains.

Bohm's relationship with Krishnamurti was based on something entirely different than the superficial image of a guru and his follower. The reality is that Krishnamurti developed a comprehensive and original philosophy of mind, a deep and elaborate exposition of the nature and structure of consciousness, including a diagnosis of the sources of illusion and of conflict in the individual and in society. That detailed, concrete, and radical philosophy is what attracted Bohm to Krishnamurti.

And so the relationship between these two men was indeed highly unusual, but not for the reasons Bohm's scientific colleagues might have imagined. Their relationship was uncommon because Krishnamurti's philosophy of mind was uncommon.

It is very original and entirely outside the mainstream of conventional ways of thinking. And so the question is not, what caused Bohm to abandon his scientific background and pursue a mindless allegiance to the leader of a cult. The real question is what moved Bohm to become so involved and invested in this particular philosophy of mind, one so radical, original, and outside the parameters of conventional ideas.

### Krishnamurti's philosophy

Space does not permit any thorough description of Krishnamurti's philosophy, but here is a brief summary, for illustrative purposes, of some of the principles or ideas that he rejected or objected to:

- Nationalism
- Organised religion
- All psychological authority
- Fame, pleasure, ideals, "seeking"
- All systems or methods of meditation
- Knowledge as a source of transformation
- Psychological achievement, "becoming"

Each one of these items represents just the tip of a large iceberg. Krishnamurti would never have presented them in this summary form or any kind of epigrammatic or casual fashion. Rather, each point was the product of a complete and detailed exposition. These are just a few highlights that I have pulled together to illustrate the original and unconventional character of his philosophy. But in addition to what he rejected, here is a list of some of the things he encouraged or actively endorsed:

- Nature
- Intelligence (as distinct from intellect)
- Facts
- What is (not escaping)
- Inquiry – doubt, questioning
- (True) meditation
- Not-knowing

### Common elements

With this as background, we can examine what influences or sequence of events contributed to Bohm's involvement with this philosophy. We can begin with the fact that quantum physics, which is the branch of physics that deals with events inside the structure of the atom, is a field of science highly conducive to philosophical inquiry. When you penetrate quantum mechanics to its deepest level, many of the principles of ordinary reality that we take for granted fly out the window and give rise to questions that are normally the province of philosophy.

Perhaps the most notorious of the strange features of the quantum world is the connection between the apparatus that we use to observe quantum events and the events under observation. In the quantum domain, the act of observation is inextricably linked with whatever is observed. This basic reality bears a strong resemblance to one of Krishnamurti's most characteristic statements about events in the psychological field: that the observer is the observed. Indeed, it was precisely this feature of Krishnamurti's philosophy of mind that initially attracted Bohm's interest and led to his involvement with Krishnamurti's work.

But this is not the only feature of quantum reality that connects with Krishnamurti's philosophy. Another important and controversial element of the quantum domain is a principle called non-locality. Some of the experimental evidence suggests that subatomic particles that are separated at a distance from one another may be related or "entangled" so that what happens to one particle immediately affects or influences what happens to the other. This phenomenon is called non-locality because it does not seem to matter whether or not the particles are located near to one another. They can still be connected or related no matter how far apart they may be.

What non-locality suggests is an underlying wholeness or deep connectivity within the basic fabric of physical reality. It is partly for this reason that wholeness was a crucial feature in the development of Bohm's theoretical physics. It is a key concept in his most important book, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

The principle of wholeness was also a central feature in Krishnamurti's philosophy of mind. He held that consciousness as we know it is divided in numerous ways, and that these divisions are inherently illusory. He maintained that the divisions in consciousness are a by-product of our failure to understand the nature of thought and cognitive processes, and that a true and accurate perception brings about psychological wholeness. This fundamental element of his philosophy was similarly important to Bohm and formed one of the basic elements of their collaboration.

### Bohm's political affiliations

The philosophical nature of quantum mechanics was not the only stream of inquiry that brought Bohm into contact with Krishnamurti. A second stream had its roots in his interest in Marxist philosophy. During his graduate years working with Oppenheimer at the University of California at Berkeley, several of Oppenheimer's students were interested in and attracted to Marxist ideology, as was Oppenheimer himself to some extent.

Because of Oppenheimer's involvement in the Manhattan Project to create the atomic bomb during World War II, his graduate students were under some degree of surveillance by the army intelligence and the FBI. As a result, in 1949, when Bohm was working as a professor at Princeton University, he was

called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities regarding people he knew and political activities from several years earlier.

Because he refused to answer all of the Committee's questions, Bohm was indicted, along with dozens of others, and tried in federal court. The court exonerated him, but the president of Princeton University was a devout anti-Communist, and he intervened in what was normally a faculty decision and refused to renew Bohm's contract. That is what led Bohm to leave the United States and to take a position at a university in Brazil, and then in Israel, and finally at University of London, where he remained for the rest of his career.

As a result of this experience, Bohm suffered a deeply personal loss based on his political convictions, and this must have contributed to his acute awareness of the currents of irrationality prevalent throughout society. This too would have prepared him to be receptive to some of Krishnamurti's views.

### Hegelian logic

In addition, the ideology of Marx had its roots in the philosophy of Hegel, and after Bohm left the United States, he became deeply immersed in the study of Hegelian logic. The new form of logic that Hegel introduced is known popularly in terms of the dialectical progression of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. But this phrase is really just an abbreviation for a deep examination of basic concepts and their relationship to one another. Hegel maintained that within any fundamental concept lie the seeds of its opposite, so that the tension between apparently opposing concepts is resolved in a higher and more complete synthesis.

In his dialectical logic, Hegel was giving close attention not only to the issues with which philosophy is concerned, but also to the process by which philosophical concepts arise and are developed. That is, he was giving attention to the very process by which thought functions. This was a key, crucial step that led to Bohm's interest in and receptivity to the work of Krishnamurti.

For Krishnamurti was above all a philosopher of the nature and structure of thought and its pervasive effects upon consciousness and daily life. Krishnamurti held that the manner in which thought functions is not properly understood, and the failure to understand it is a primary source of illusion and conflict in the individual and in society. Bohm was keenly receptive to this point of view in part as a result of his immersion in the philosophy of Hegel.

To illustrate Krishnamurti's view, here is a list of some of the things he had to say about the nature of thought.

- Thought is mechanical.
- Thought is a material process.
- Thought is limited.
- Thought is fragmentary.
- Thought is knowledge.
- Thought is time.
- The word (thought) is not the thing.

As with our previous list, Krishnamurti would never have expressed these ideas in the brief, summary manner in which they are presented here. In his exposition any one of these ideas would form part of an integrated, comprehensive description of how thought functions and the ways in which it is not properly understood.

These are some of the themes of crucial interest to Bohm and the reason for his extensive collaboration with Krishnamurti. Four years after Krishnamurti died, Bohm conducted a seminar in Ojai, California that became the basis for a book called *Thought as a System*. In that book, many of these themes are described in detail, with Bohm's exceptional skill at elucidating subtle ideas with illuminating examples and colorful metaphors.

So the collaboration between Bohm and Krishnamurti was indeed uncommon, but not for the superficial reasons one might at first imagine. It was a direct and logical consequence of the progression of Bohm's thinking both in the philosophical implications of quantum theory, and also along the path from Marx to Hegel, including the attention to the nature and process of thought and its effects upon consciousness.

### Personal reminiscences

Years ago, when Krishnamurti was alive and I was serving as director of his school in Ojai, the Oak Grove School, Bohm and his wife Saral used to come out to Ojai from their home in England every year for six weeks during the Spring. It was Bohm's habit to take a nap in the afternoon between three and four, and when he got up, he liked to have a cup of tea and go for a long walk. During those years, I often went up to his apartment at the four o'clock hour to talk with him and have tea and walk together.

Bohm and his wife always stayed in an upstairs apartment in the office building next to Krishnamurti's home in the east end of the Ojai valley, and our daily walk took us half a mile up a slight incline to the campus of an old and well-established private school. There we continued our walk around a road that circled the whole perimeter of the large school property.

On our way home, Bohm liked to quote a saying from Hegel. It was an aphorism about Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom. Minerva had a little owl that used to go with her wherever she went, and so the owl of Minerva became known as a symbol of

wisdom. Hegel believed that the development of philosophy was tied to the development of history, but he thought that philosophy is always one step behind historical events, and doesn't catch up until a major era or epoch of history is almost over.

Hegel said that the owl of Minerva flies at dusk, by which he meant that the wisdom of philosophy can only make a new development at the end or the twilight of an historical epoch. So when Bohm and I kept talking philosophy until night was starting to fall, he would sometimes adapt Hegel's aphorism in an amusing way and say, "The owl of Minerva flies at dusk."

Over the course of seven or eight years, I went on a hundred or more walks like this with Bohm. Our conversation usually lasted two hours or more. The topic of discussion was almost always psychological issues of the kind that he liked to explore with Krishnamurti, and he would do about ninety percent of the talking. My role was to listen and pose questions and say what points I did not understand or were unclear. Bohm was absolutely tireless in his willingness to explain and explore and explicate whatever question we were discussing, even as night fell and it began to get dark. The owl of Minerva flies at dusk.

### Relative contributions

One of the issues I had to address in my book was the relative contributions of Bohm and Krishnamurti to the work they were engaged in. The centre of gravity of their work together was Krishnamurti's philosophy of mind, and that was the basis for their mutual explorations. Nevertheless, Bohm made a great contribution to Krishnamurti's work. Krishnamurti clearly wanted his teachings to be consistent with a scientific approach. He wanted the teachings to be factual, not speculative. He wanted people to challenge and question and inquire. He didn't want anything to be accepted on the basis of personal authority. All of this is consistent with the spirit of scientific inquiry. Bohm was well attuned to that mode of inquiry, and he helped Krishnamurti proceed and discuss in that manner.

Nevertheless, there were some differences in their manner and their approach. This was apparent in the way they handled group discussions, such as the many conversations with teachers at the school. Krishnamurti was very serious and sometimes a little bit sharp in the way he replied to people in group dialogues, whereas Bohm was more relaxed and agreeable. Some people said that whenever Krishnamurti was asked a question, he would always begin by saying no, whereas Bohm would begin by saying yes.

When I was a teacher at the school, sitting in the group meetings with Krishnamurti, I would sometimes complain to him afterwards about the way he responded to people. Once I said he seemed to be angry, and he said, no, he was not angry, he just wanted to *move*. Another time he told me, "I cannot tame myself."

There was one occasion when Krishnamurti asked me directly how I would assess the relative contributions of Bohm and himself. I said he was like the sun and Bohm was like the moon, suggesting that the light of the moon is a reflection of the sun. This seemed to satisfy Krishnamurti, but it wasn't quite fair to Bohm, because his light was by no means just the reflection of Krishnamurti or anyone else. What I found remarkable is that Krishnamurti even raised such a question. There is no one else in his career that he would have posed this question about. But it was pretty clear when I said he was the sun and Bohm was the moon, that he thought I was on the right track.

I still agree with that assessment. Krishnamurti was the one with the extraordinary insight, and he always spoke from that direct perception. Bohm was more articulate in some ways, more precise in his language and detailed in his descriptions, but I think his understanding was more intellectual and not as deep and comprehensive as Krishnamurti.

We can also turn the question around and consider what was Bohm's assessment of Krishnamurti. With respect to that issue, we don't have to guess or speculate, because I recorded a conversation with Bohm about two years after Krishnamurti died and raised these questions with him. The transcript of that conversation is included as an appendix in my book. I won't try to summarise it except to say that Bohm had a very interesting and nuanced overall assessment of the philosophy and the personality of Krishnamurti.

At the end of his life, Bohm suffered a serious depression that required him to be hospitalised for several months. Some people have interpreted this as the failure of his work in the psychological field, but I feel this is unfair and wrong. One person who had this attitude told me, "By their fruit you shall know them," meaning that if Bohm got depressed, then all of his work in self-understanding must have been for nothing. That passage in the Bible comes from the book of Matthew:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing.... A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

In reality, the causes of depression are not well understood, and there is a great deal of evidence that depression is often purely chemical in nature and may not have any kind of psychological source. It may be simply an illness, like pneumonia or Parkinson's disease. So to attribute Bohm's depression to some kind of psychological failure seems to me wrong and unfair.



But even if his depression did have some degree of psychological origin, that in no way diminishes his accomplishments in the psychological field. We have no way of knowing how disturbed he may have become if he had never met Krishnamurti or taken any interest in psychological issues. He may have become much more depressed at a much earlier age.

### Who was Krishnamurti?

Finally, I would like to mention one other issue that is addressed in my book. That is the question raised by Krishnamurti's biographer, Mary Lutyens, in the second volume of her biography, *Years of Fulfillment*. At the end of that book, she asks, "Who or What was Krishnamurti?" She describes how she addressed this question directly to Krishnamurti. They discussed it at some length, but in the end he said he was incapable of answering it. He makes the rather memorable statement, "Water can never find out what water is." Mary Lutyens leaves the question unresolved.

One way to approach this question is simply to bring into focus why it is necessary to ask it. And that is because Krishnamurti was such an unusual individual. I review in my book some of the unique characteristics of him that demand explanation. One was the extraordinary prophecy made in his early teens that he would become the "World Teacher." He had an extreme sensitivity to nature, as expressed in exceptionally detailed and nuanced descriptions recorded in many of his books. He had a unique form of meditation, unlike any other approach, which he insisted was the only meaningful kind of meditation. He experienced a strange, intermittent pain in his head and neck throughout his adult life, one which was associated in some obscure manner with his psychological observations. And above all there was his original, profound philosophy of mind.

Any one of these characteristics would mark Krishnamurti as highly unusual, but taken together they represent an entirely singular individual, someone unlike anyone else who

has ever lived. So in one of the last chapters of my book, I address the question posed by Mary Lutyens and review some possible answers, and attempt to shed some light on this mystery.

I would like to conclude by saying what a privilege it was to know and work with each of these men. I knew at the time it was happening how lucky I was, but my admiration and appreciation for them has only grown through the years. Therefore to write the story of their relationship was not only a privilege but an enormous responsibility. Krishnamurti and Bohm were both historic figures and their relationship with one another was an important chapter in the history of the twentieth century.



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