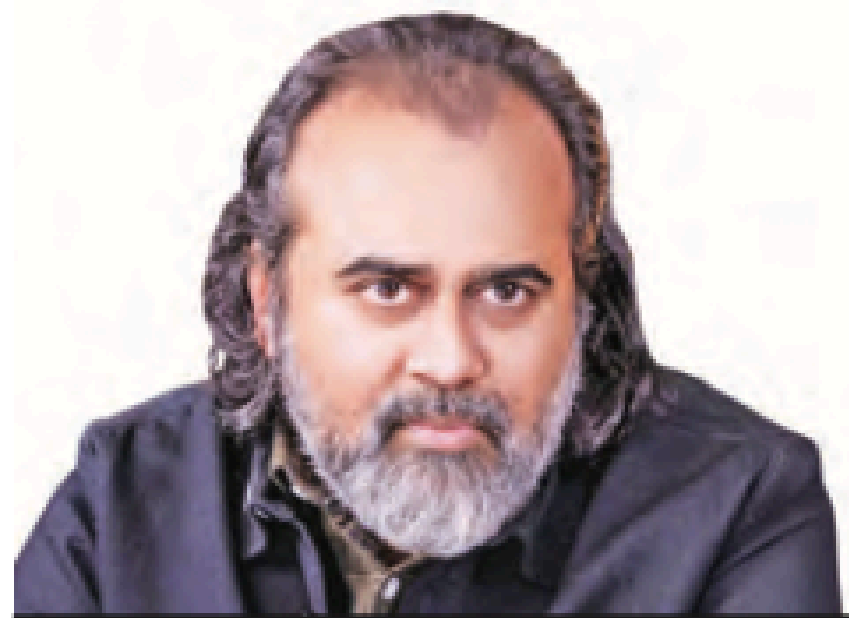


## What Cambridge kept asking: The crisis has a centre



**ACHARYA PRASHANT**

On May 30, I spoke at the Cambridge Union as part of the Cambridge India Business Dialogue, in conversation with Professor Jaideep Prabhu of the Judge Business School. I had been told it would run for about an hour; the room had other intentions. Hands kept rising, the questions deepened, and what had been planned as a single session became nearly three across two days.

What struck me was not the grandeur of the surroundings but the quality of the hunger. These were economists and business scholars, trained to solve problems with models, data and policy; yet something in that room kept return-

ing, insistently, to a question no model addresses: the question of the self that produces the crises the world is so busy trying to solve.

Technology, management and policy are tools, held in hands, and the question that drove me out of the corporate world was not about the tools but about the person behind them: what that person actually wanted, and whether they had ever examined that wanting with any seriousness.

The crisis is a specific combination: enormous outer power meeting an almost entirely unexamined inner life. Inwardly, the human being still operates from the same primitive centre that drove the cave dweller, the felt sense of incompleteness, the restless wanting that no acquisition has ever settled. The issue of having has been met with extraordinary sophistication; the issue of wanting remains almost entirely untouched, and it is there that the crisis lives. A member of the audience asked, with genuine urgency, whether there was time, since climate catastrophe advances faster than any inner transformation could. I understand the urgency and do not dismiss it; but I want to be precise about what the data actually shows.

The economist William Stanley Jevons observed in 1865 that as steam engines became more efficient, coal consumption did not fall but rose. The reason is not complicated: efficiency lowers the effective cost of using a resource, and lower cost increases demand. Yet the electricity demanded by digital infrastructure, streaming and artificial intelligence has grown to staggering proportions, the efficiency gain consumed by the appetite it was meant to constrain. The Jevons Paradox is the operating principle of an ego handed a cheaper instrument: it uses more, not less, because the instrument was always in service of an appetite, and an appetite does not self-limit through efficiency.

In 2024, every single energy source on the planet, coal, oil, gas, nuclear, hydro, wind and solar, reached its highest level of consumption in recorded history. Clean energy did not replace dirty energy; it was stacked on top of it, because the demand underneath kept growing and did not care where the electricity came from.

The carbon inequality data is perhaps the most telling fact of all. The richest one per cent of humanity is responsible for sixteen per cent of global emissions, consuming its entire fair annual share of the carbon budget within the first ten days of the year. The people doing the damage are not the people in need; they are the people who already have everything, and in having everything they want more, not less. They are the ordinary human with the external brake removed, revealing an appetite with no internal point of rest.

Then there is the record of more than three decades of climate negotiation, thirty Conferences of the Parties since 1992. When that process began, atmospheric carbon dioxide stood at roughly 356 parts per million; it stands today at above 425 and is still rising. The policy route keeps falling short because the person who drafts the policy in the morning is the same person who finds the workaround in the evening. The voter who demands climate action at the ballot box is the same consumer who demands comfort at the checkout, operating from a centre never examined, whose wanting was never on the table when the policy was written.

None of this is an argument against technology or policy. Solar panels and carbon pricing are necessary; the physics of the crisis demands material responses. But they are structurally insufficient on their own, because they address the symptom while leaving the generator of symptoms entirely in place. Stopping does not require time; it is reaching that requires time, accelerating that requires time.

The question is not what more can be done, but whether the one doing can first be understood. Someone in the Cambridge audience asked at what age the inner education should begin. The answer is simple: from the moment a child is curious enough to ask "What is this?" about the world, the capacity is already present to ask "What am I?" about the asker. The first question has been cultivated across every education system in the world; the second has been almost entirely ignored. This is what I have been trying to address through the education programme I run, in which students work through philosophical texts not because the texts are the point but because they are mirrors, asking the one question every other curriculum omits: Who is the one who knows?

The distinction between willpower and intent is, I think, the heart of the matter. The climate summits have been exercises in willpower: the ego identifying an external enemy and mobilising force against it, while its own wanting remains entirely intact.

Intent is the ego turned against its own grain, the self choosing to examine itself rather than its objects. It does not require a new summit; it requires a mirror, and the willingness to look into it without looking away. I remain grateful to the Cambridge India Business Society, the Judge Business School and Professor Prabhu for the warmth of that afternoon and the seriousness of its questions. That hunger is not unique to Cambridge; it is everywhere a person reaches for the next thing and finds it insufficient.

The crisis is not out there. It has a centre, and the centre is the human being who has never been asked, in any classroom or at any summit, to look at himself with the same rigour he has applied to everything else. The education this planet needs has not yet been seriously attempted. What is being waited for is not a better instrument. It is the willingness to turn the instrument around.



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