

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES

'If you deal with society you must accept its ways, for its ways are your ways. Your needs and demands have created them. Your desires are so complex and contradictory – no wonder the society you create is also complex and contradictory.'

Nisargadatta Maharaj

The Power of Social and Cultural Pressure

- o In ordinary life people are prey to cultural influences of many kinds. Some of these are clearly identified and acknowledged, but others are unperceived or regarded as something entirely different (inevabilities, fixed laws, absolutes and so on).

The members of all communities, including nations and whole civilizations, are infused with the prevailing ideologies of those communities. These, in turn, create attitudes of mind which include certain capacities and equally positively exclude others. The ideologies may be so ancient, so deep-seated or so subtle that they are not identified as such by the people at large. (1)

- o Each culture maintains certain patterns of thought and behaviour in order to establish and preserve itself. These act to effectively limit or attenuate the range of perceptions and activity of the community.

People have sanctified greed – so long as it is the kind of greed prized by the society. All other kinds of greed are labelled 'bad', but acceptable greed is labelled 'good motivation', only too often. This diversion of greed into national, tribal and similar objectives only perpetuates addictive behaviour. People develop a taste for, say, attention; the society says: 'Yes, you may have it – all you have to do is to seek our approval by works of charity, heroism' – whatever the society in question thinks it wants or needs. Such approved works not infrequently cause injustice to others.

Because the victim seeks and gets stimuli, he is generally fully occupied with this, and fails to see that he is being manipulated, or that he has a compulsion. His spectrum of perception of the (in this case) acquisitive is never developed. It is as if he had a sense of touch but could not tell fine from rough, or hot from cold. He is correspondingly at a disadvantage to people who have a finer sense and also in respect to his and his society's possible variety, including the solution of problems.

As he has never been told that there is sensitive touch (to continue the analogy), he cannot perceive it. As he gets approval for using coarse touch, he is at the mercy of those people and institutions which lay down the rules. As he does not conceive the possibility of anything more sophisticated, he has no chance of finding it.

Because it does not exist, of course, within the terms of his conventions, in his tribe.

Or he may imagine the possibility, but be wrong in his choice of method of trying to develop it. (2)

- o Societies are self-restrictive primarily due to the nature of their assumptions and beliefs. Customs, conventions and social pressures can easily become coercive agents in the life and experience of an individual and community.

There are two kinds of popular belief:

1. Erroneous beliefs by individuals and groups, generally due to inadequate information, easily cured by exposure to the real facts purveyed by experts;
2. Erroneous beliefs, often held by experts and authorities of various kinds, and often enshrined in human organizations and institutions, which contemporary experience and to some extent investigation is showing to have influenced many of our ways of working and thinking in spite of being entirely or partly wrong . . . (3)

- o Most cultures are based on a world-view or ‘consensus reality’ which determines the relative value and worth of things, people and ideas.

Relative truths include widespread behavior patterns, shared values, moral codes, laws, and even scientific principles. For example, the value of such things as money, gold, silver, diamonds, and collectibles of all kinds is established by relative truths. Hence, it is now widely accepted that certain postage stamps are rare and in demand by collectors; therefore, they are considered valuable and expensive. As the demand increases, their value increases year after year.

This consensus value is well known and an accepted truth, especially for stamp collectors. At this writing, some stamps are valued at more than a quarter of a million dollars. The relativity or arbitrary nature of this “truth” is rarely recognized. In effect, “rare” stamps are merely small, useless pieces of thin paper and have no intrinsic value. What makes stamps valuable is simply their widespread demand created by informal, consensual agreement. Just as easily, such “rarities” as whale bones, old soup cans, old door handles, and sloth dung could be consensually agreed upon as collectibles, and hence be considered valuable. In fact, this is now the very case with such diverse items as bubblegum baseball cards, comic books, beer cans, whiskey bottles, duck decoys, and so on. (4)

- o Cultures are based on certain assumed absolutes which inform and modify the structure and products of the culture, including individuals, institutions and schools of thought.

All cultures specialize and neglect, include and exclude. It is fascinating to note how people imagine that to accept certain postulates must automatically make them avoid others, however.

After all, if you talk to someone who believes that success only comes through prodigious expenditure of effort, and that success is what everyone else also thinks is success, you can hardly expect him to be interested in the possibility that there can be non-energetic success and non-ambitious progress – let alone the contention that what everyone else may be thinking might just be incomplete. (5)

- o The values and assumptions of a society are accepted and agreed principles established in the mental set of the people, often without any critical evaluation or questioning.

If you belong to a community which has made certain assumptions about life and society, and even knowledge, you will find that the community constitutes a stable entity so long as it does not question its basic assumptions. This may inhibit progress.

In New Guinea it has been observed not only that the head-hunting system worked to virtually everyone's satisfaction, but also that, when threatened by different moral values from outside, it disintegrated. When, for instance, young men seeking a bride were forbidden to carry out the custom of lopping off an enemy's head and were thus prevented from taking it – as proof of their manliness – as an offering to their intended father-in-law, they suffered what was indistinguishable from what we call guilt and remorse. In their context it *was* guilt and remorse.

In any society stabilized upon a whole range of interlocking assumptions, many of which really do seem to verify one another, there is a sense of coherence and strength which is naturally highly prized by its members. This is, of course, because the individuals are not autonomous enough to be alone for long. This desire to identify oneself by group-association is so strong that when one social grouping breaks down it is normal for it to be succeeded by another ideology offering similar facilities for reassurance and an adequate world view. This is the familiar story of national and cultural history. It has its parallels in the individual. (6)

- o In most contemporary societies people will only follow the suggestions and directions of well-established types of figures (so-called leaders and opinion-makers). This is a form of inflexibility which blunts progress toward learning. "For whole populations, thoughts, words and actions are the result of internalized ideology: frozen intention originating from others."
- o The search for comfort and reassurance preoccupies the members of dependency-oriented cultures. In the sphere of social activity, most people will try to 'fit in' and conform in order to feel comfortable and accepted.

Put someone among people who wear different clothes, sing certain songs, carry out unfamiliar practices, and what do you get? This individual will either reject the new environment, will remain unaffected or will imitate it. It will depend upon where he (or she) finds most comfort and safety. In the case of people with a well-defined idea of their own identity, and with a community with which to identify, you may expect rejection or no effect. Among those who are uncertain, estranged, fearful, you will be most likely to find imitation. This 'convert' will have found what is imagined to be safety. (7)

- o The structure, belief-patterns and influences of our social milieu are reflections of the unhealthy psychological makeup of the majority of the human community.

Our society today emphasizes the fractional personality which is the origin of competition, achieving, aggression, war. We are encouraged to be more and more specialized. It takes us away from our real global nature. But domination, assertion and manipulation can never bring wisdom and a healthy society. On the contrary, the light of wisdom, love and harmony is concealed by the personality and its qualifications. Our society is living in the dark. But love and wisdom are infinitely patient, unchanged, ever there since before time. (8)

- o The inner dynamic of many characteristic institutions of a culture may not be readily apparent to members of that culture. The outer shape is accepted as the only reality. “Institutions which offer reassurance and identification will continue to appear. Unless their true inner dynamic is noted, they will, of course, continue to be perceived by people of that culture as whatever their outward shape says they are.”

It is because the social appearance of the institution is social, political, educational, vocational, and so on, that the ground-plan, the structure is seldom noted at all. If someone says that such-and-such a body is for learning, people seldom imagine that it is really social, and so on. There are certain exceptions, when people notice that students at evening classes are very often there to fill in time or to make friends rather than to learn; or when there are putatively sporting, say, or religious associations where the social side has gone so far as to be regarded as integrally important, or even vital, to its functions: ‘If we love one another, we will be more effective’; or ‘we do a lot of trout fishing, but the accent here is strongly upon social life’.

You should note, however, that it is often possible to combine two or more of these factors without particularly harming the enterprise: for instance, if you are trying to raise money for charity, you may be able to do it better in a social atmosphere or among commercial associates. The points being made are that, first, it is valuable to *know* the relative quantity of various ingredients, social, attention-attracting or developmental, so that the organization can be understood; secondly, that certain enterprises will suffer if the ingredients get out of proportion. (9)

- o The influence of cultural assumptions are pervasive and lead to a form of self-deception and confusion in which reality is inverted.

Look closely at human collective credos and enterprises and you will be able to see that they are based upon wonderfully few and crude basic assumptions. Man avoids perceiving this by claiming that what really are assumptions are truths, and that what is only emotionality is really something sublime.

Institutions, behaviour and dogmas may proclaim human values, significance and dignity, even a high human destiny. In fundamental theory, structure and above all in action, they belie any deep belief in these magnificent concepts.

Instead of acting in accordance with a belief in man, most individuals and societies long ago adopted today’s meagre substitutes for belief: indoctrination, conditioning, the implanting of systematic obsessions. (10)

- o Negative beliefs and attitudes are passed on to children through parents and elders, preventing full human growth and understanding.

A child learns from its parents and those adults who surround it. It learns not only the positive injunctions of problem-solving which its elders think they are teaching it. In addition it is learning to emulate the parents; and it emulates their defeatism. This includes their rationalizations of why they do not attempt certain tasks, why they are ‘too tired’, or such-and-such an effort is not ‘worthwhile’.

This is true in the individual as it is in society. Nobody on record had run a

four-minute mile before someone did it. After that, because the unspoken taboo has been beaten, it became more and more common. A similar process takes place in children learning, perhaps sometimes without words, not to make a certain effort, an effort of will or of experiment.

It is largely because this has not been realized on a wide enough scale that nothing is done about it. In apparently progressive cultures it is believed that any traumatic disabilities occasioned by the behaviour of the parents can be 'engineered' out of the children by psychotherapists. But the practitioners themselves are not tested for the presence of cultural negatives. Furthermore, when the child is returned to his or her environment there is no established way to make sure that he will not be reinfected. (11)

Social Conformity and Automatism

- o The beliefs, assumptions and activities of most contemporary cultures produces a general uniformity, converting human beings into 'machines'. People are trained to imitate and copy others. "Mimicry is trying to look like someone or something else instead of looking, feeling or being like *oneself*."

Supposing for a moment that you were not yourself, but a visitor among men, ignorant of their ways of behaving and their elaborate habits of self-deception.

One of the first things which you would notice is that a large part of people's time is spent in thinking and acting just like other people, while at the same time they energetically claim that they are 'different'.

You would conclude that this predilection stemmed from a warp of thinking, and was a serious barrier to making use even of the things which they do understand. (12)

- o Throughout human history many diverse cultures and societies lived independently of each other, insulated from the values and beliefs of competing cultures. Today in the era of mass communication and mutual interchange it is no longer possible for societies to maintain a distinct and exclusive character.
- o Cultures and societies throughout the world regulate behaviour through moral and religious strictures which can prevent the development of a natural, spontaneous morality based on the requirements of the moment.

Q: Is there such a thing as immoral behaviour?

A: When you live as consciousness, every moment brings morality which springs out of beauty. For those who live in beauty, codified morality is immoral because what may be moral in the situation today may not be appropriate for tomorrow. Codified morality accepts repetition. When every moment brings its own moral understanding and way of acting, there is an interior plasticity of mind and body. As long as you call yourself a personal identity you are motivated by security and compensation and there is no adequate living in the moment. This is the condition of people today. We live in a lame society where there is no

ripeness and no maturity. That is why, in a certain way, codified morality prevents the society from crumbling completely. So when we give our children codified behaviour as a crutch, it must be with the firm conviction that one day they will be able to act intelligently. (13)

- o Although different communities and cultures appear to have distinct outward forms and appearances, the inner psychological dynamic is often surprisingly similar.

Ordinary communities come into being, grow, develop, die and regenerate, in certain very similar patterns.

People think that these communities are different from one another because of outward shapes.

But they have characteristics which utilize human tendencies like self-esteem, greed, the desire to receive approval (or, failing that, attention of any sort) and so on.

Unable or unwilling to resist a community's demands for these and other satisfactions, almost all the leaders of human groups have, knowingly or otherwise, made use of them.

The inevitable result has been that almost all human groupings – whatever their overt aims – structurally resemble one another. They are, or rapidly become, manifestations of the same characteristics. They only masquerade as being 'in search of knowledge', or as 'uplifting the people', or as 'spreading information', even as 'increasing wealth and prosperity'.

This is because they are only able to appear to do such things as long as the individuals and mass of the community are gaining or being promised some lower satisfaction.

This fact has been observed, only too well, by sociologists and psychologists. It is so marked that these experts have gone so far as to believe that no human community can come about, progress or survive unless it panders to the lower human proclivities.

If this were so, there would be no hope for the human race. (14)

- o Habits and conforming social behaviour produces a sense of familiarity and predictability which may prevent higher growth and development.

The shackles of poverty and oppression are visible to the ordinary eye, and it is not hard to find agreement in sympathy for those thus afflicted. Often, however, people – and peoples – are chained by shackles that they in fact treasure. As one Zen master said, it is hard for people to see anything wrong with what they like, or to see anything good in what they do not like. Another Zen master noted that familiarity itself is a quality that people are generally inclined to like. This means that predilections and habits with which people feel comfortable at a given time may serve them for comfort but may in fact be holding them back from greater capacity for progress and fulfillment. (15)

Materialism and Consumerism

'We have become mere cogs in a wheel that is spinning out of control, living by a value system that does not see the person as a human being but merely as a consumer of things.'

Philip Kapleau

- o Materialistic societies are one-sided in nature and characterized by manipulation and conditioning. "In a world of mass communication every effort is directed toward making people believe that they want or need certain things."

Virtually all organizations known to you work largely by means of your greed. They attract you because what they say or do appeals to your greed. This is concealed only by their appearance. If you stop listening to their words and look at the effect, you will soon see it. (16)

- o People are led to believe that the ownership of material objects is riches and the physical absence of things is poverty. In reality the truly 'rich' are those who are independent of poverty: those who do not care if they are poor or not poor.
- o Much of the activity of contemporary society is driven by the pursuit of money. Money and material advantages can be administered wisely or selfishly depending on one's spiritual understanding and maturity.

Q: I find I worry a lot about money. Is this justified?

A: You are not the owner of what you have. You are the administrator. When you are an administrator and not an owner you'll behave completely differently because you are free from it. You will utilize it differently according to the situation and not with a view to accumulation. Spend money graciously!

Q: How can we know how much we need? I have a family and tend to worry about the future.

A: When you come to know yourself you come to a hierarchy of value. As you no longer emphasize the phenomenal, you use the world completely differently. Don't associate yourself with a competitive, productive society that constantly creates needs, new elements for survival. Our society is bound to consumerism. It's a completely artificial creation.

Don't spend too much time working for money to accumulate! You should be able to work three or four days a week or have half the day to live in beauty. When you have a family the present has a certain extension. How far it goes only you know, but don't live in the future! (17)

- o Competitiveness and the pursuit of "more and more" are the sacred gods of our materialistically driven society. But the price of this compulsive behaviour is high.

Competitiveness is one of the sacred values of our society, presumed to work all the wonders of growth and progress. But what is the price of this “growth and progress.”? Can we see how caught up we are in these values ourselves? We are the society. Do we question these values thoroughly whenever we see them arise? We can see the seriousness of the problem manifesting in a frustrated child who gets an upset stomach before going to school, who is crying, screaming, begging not to go, thinking he will “never be able to do all this” even though he is capable. (18)

- o Western society largely functions as a ‘supply-and-demand mechanism.’

When you get supply-and-demand, people asking for others to fill a certain role, and when you get someone who feels equally pleased in filling it, you may get education. But if you look around you, you will see that more often than not you are getting what is nothing more than the formation of a new tribe, or a business, trading one thing for another.

This transactionalism has its uses. If, for instance, someone gets pleasure from giving orders and others derive acceptable pleasure from obeying them, there you may have the makings of a constructive or a destructive enterprise. Most human activities are modelled upon this pattern. (19)

- o The so-called commercial society conditions people to such an extent that an automatic mentality prevails. When ambition and desire are over-emphasized, other values and possibilities of development are ignored.

We are living in a world where certain orientations are so common that we don’t know that we are their prisoner. There is all the difference in the world between your ambition commanding you, and you commanding it. Now that so many human difficulties have been surmounted, man- and womankind is in a position to give attention to those possibilities of human flexibility which previously had no ‘cash value’ and hence were underdeveloped. (20)

- o Our contemporary way of life places an undue emphasis on materialism and the physical aspect of reality. The world is seen in a different light when the perspective and valuation rests on spiritual rather than on material considerations.

Western culture is overly materialistic and spiritually weakened. Despite great material and scientific progress, hypocrisy and intolerance are rife, and the deadly failings of greed and vanity are built into the very structure of society. Education in the West is, with some exceptions, too fact-oriented, and is failing to produce men and women of adequate quality. In fact, Western psychology, starting with Freud, has misunderstood the nature of man, the concentration having been on man’s similarities to the animals, not on his creativity, which is what distinguishes him from them. But with present materialist trends unchecked, civilization itself is threatened, and a counterbalance to the damage stemming from greed and worldly vanity is needed. (21)

- o The consequences of rampant materialism and unrestricted growth are dire for our planet, its myriad forms of life and its human inhabitants.

The contamination of our own and the world's environment and our squandering of dwindling natural resources through over-consumption, waste and mismanagement speak eloquently of our greed and irresponsibility. How long will the rest of the world stand by while we in North America, with only 6 percent of the world's population, consume 40 percent of its resources?

However much our self-indulgent living habits have contributed to the world's energy shortage and to pollution and inflation, these ailments are but outward manifestations of our inner malaise. The energy crisis is really an internal one: how to mobilize the unlimited energy locked within us – how to split the atom of the mind – and use it wisely for ourselves and mankind. Behind economic inflation is the inflated national ego. As for pollution, the most fundamental pollution of all is that of the mind by the mind. (22)

Propaganda, Indoctrination and Conditioning

- o People of the contemporary world are conditioned by a constellation of impacts and experiences. "In most human societies, unanimity of thought has been arrived at by an unrecognized conditioning process in which virtually all the society's institutions may be branches of the conditioning process."

Until comparatively recently most peoples lived in mutually exclusive communities, isolated from one another. Social science and psychology were in their infancy or excluded, and in general, multicultural communities had little access to single-culture ones, which latter effectively dominated the world.

But a new situation, unprecedented in its spread and urgency, arose with the discovery and wide publication of the phenomena of conditioning and indoctrination.

When confronted with this knowledge, few extant cultures could explain why conditioning was necessary, or why so many well-established belief-systems were indistinguishable from 'brainwashing' ones.

Looking at the history and development of belief-systems, it is not hard to perceive that they always deteriorate in their flexibility and capacity to understand. They also, and as a consequence, tend to rely more and more upon authority and oversimplification. None can be said to have guarded effectively against conditioning. (23)

- o Many of the values and beliefs of a culture are transmitted through indoctrination posing as learning and education. There is a general distortion of understanding produced by the implanting of cultural biases and the programming of the people's thoughts and behaviour.
- o Attitudes and opinions can be moulded and conditioned into people by other people. In the Western world, a great deal of time is spent in the social engineering of belief, conviction and commitment. There is an important saying: 'When you are most convinced: that is the time to use caution about your certainty.'

- o The process and effects of conditioning permeate modern societies to an extent unimagined by the ordinary person.

At the human level, much conditioning occurs in the form of indoctrination, brainwashing, “hypnosis”, and thought control. Through the process of socialization, we are subtly and effectively trained to believe or think certain things. Few of us realize that almost all of our opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (not to mention behaviours) are those implanted in us by our society. We rarely stop to consider what it is we are doing or saying, or why.

The power of social pressure, enculturation, imitation and conformity is much greater than we are generally willing to acknowledge. We believe we have free will (which we do), but much less of it is utilized than we self-deceptively believe. It might be more accurate to say that we have the potential for free will but rarely exercise it. (24)

- o The process of conditioning is a fundamental, though largely unrecognized, force in almost all forms of human life. “Virtually all human communities are established and maintained by the reward/punishment and repetition mechanisms.”

All human societies are based upon, and their continuity and growth are reinforced by, the use of hope, fear and repetition.

Although this simple structure is not visible to the overwhelming majority of people, everyone who is concerned with human groupings uses and approves the application of hope, fear and repetition.

The structure is employed in every type of organization: whether tribal, national, political, religious, recreational, educational or other.

Two things mitigate against the recognition of the structure by the people in it and those operating it: -

1. The seeming diversity of objectives of the societies in question;
2. The very simplicity of the structure. It is so obvious as not to be self-evident in the way in which people think things are self-evident.

There is also an unspoken, because unrecognized, consensus in human thought upon this matter. Because everyone is accustomed to being manipulated by hope and fear, and because everyone assumes that repetition is necessary, the possible progress in analysing this situation is virtually at a halt. (25)

- o It is important to be able to distinguish between real causes and those conditioned by pressure and propaganda. There is an ancient saying: *‘However useful a garment, it is not for eating.’*

As important a fact as any individual cause on earth is the virtual incapacity of the human individual to distinguish between a genuine cause and one which is foisted upon him by pressure, environment, propaganda, conditioning.

If people had the sense they pretend to have, they would seek the means to make this fundamental distinction perceptible.

Hardly anyone makes this effort. This is partly because it is an invisible but powerful part of their culture to teach that conditioned emotionality and ‘causes’ whose necessity, urgency and rightness is only conditioned into them are, necessarily, right. (26)

- o Ideological thinking is a form of mental indoctrination, lacking flexibility and a comprehensive perspective. When tribal and nationalistic tendencies are unchecked they undermine the stability and safety of all countries and all peoples of the world. “Ideology drives people into absurd forms of thought and behaviour. Beware of it, because it attempts to apply mechanical concepts to human development.”

Q: What do you think of nationalism?

A: Biological survival includes the community, language, rituals, customs and so on. Culture is an extension of the individual, so in a sense the deep urge to protect the culture is part of biological survival. But nationalism is based on idealism. It is an abstraction, a fabrication. It is collective psychological survival. The protective instinct of biological survival has a certain limit, the limit of physical security. It is impossible that biological survival alone could lead to grand-scale war. The limits of psychological survival, on the other hand, are less defined. Psychological survival stems from the mind and will go as far as the mind goes. (27)

- o Indoctrination is a decisive factor in human belief and involves both the giving and withholding of information. “Lack of information leads to untenable attitudes, confusion and a breakdown in communication.”

Man is easily conditioned and many of his ills and woes in all ages are due to this inherence. The root cause of this ‘conditionability’ is man’s incapacity for handling information.

Indoctrination campaigns involve the giving of information. They also involve the withholding of information. In a real sense, people form their opinion from a *lack of data*. They need more information but they need, also, to be prepared for the difficulty of handling it. They do not understand that they need more information or do they understand that if they were given it, they would probably reject it. (28)

- o Almost all types of human groupings and organizations utilize conditioning in one form or another.

All systems, cults, metaphysical groups and almost all human organizations, practise conditioning. That is to say, they instil into people a limited range of beliefs and require certain automatic practices. Unknowingly, the people concerned (which can include the instillers) become ‘servants’ of the system.

Some systems are what we can call non-comprehensive. These would include those which do not have a world-view, and which function effectively enough within well-understood and accepted limits. A group of people associated together for the purpose of playing a game, carrying out a business or pursuing a limited objective could be called non-comprehensive.

‘Comprehensive’ systems are those with a world-view, or with an outlook which causes their members to act as if they had a world-view. Such systems are those which require (deliberately or in practice) their members to act with regard to a comprehensive set of beliefs which covers all, or most, eventualities. (29)

- o The influence of political or any type of propaganda can be minimized with a correct attitude and sense of detachment.

Political propaganda can annoy you: let's say that you take exception to it, this is quite correct; but you shouldn't let it put you off balance or unnerve you, because this is one of its functions. Its basis is disinformation: the idea being to feed you enough disinformation for your thinking to become disoriented. You don't react to it any more than noticing that it is going on, and you identify it using exactly the same technique as one uses for identifying and dealing with one's own problems: you break the elements down, separate them out, and look at each one of them in turn. (30)

Power Structures and Authoritarianism

'Power represents destruction, even self-destruction, quite contrary to love's creativeness. Love dies and lives again, while power kills and is killed.'

D.T. Suzuki

- o In many societies restrictions are imposed on what people can write, say or do. Yet there is a limit to the effectiveness of this process. "Even in cultures where authoritarian and mechanical thinking have choked comprehensive understanding, human individuality will have to assert itself."
- o People, individually and collectively, will attack and persecute others who say and do things which are perceived as threatening.

Anyone who says or writes anything which seems to conflict with the true or false beliefs of a community or any part of it deliberately accepts the risk of being misunderstood and vilified and perhaps punished. People are widely held to have the right to attack what they dislike. We have not yet, however, reached the stage where it is required that people understand (though they purport to describe) the roots of liking and disliking. (31)

- o There is a widespread human need for authority and leadership, regardless of whether they are needed or not. "Presidents or other political leaders can do very little; such leaders are really only followers and merely reflect the ongoing tide of concerns and events already proceeding within the populace itself."

People are always looking for leaders; that does not mean that this is the time for a leader. The problems that a leader would be able to resolve have not been identified. Nor does the clamour mean that those who cry out are suitable followers. Most of the people who demand a leader seem to have some baby's idea of what a leader should do. The idea that a leader will walk in and we will all recognize him and follow him and everybody will be happy strikes me as a strangely immature

ativism. Most of these people, I believe, want not a leader, but excitement. I doubt that those who cry the loudest would obey a leader if there was one. (32)

- o It is important to identify and understand the nature of 'power structures' in organizations and situations where they exist.

Almost all human organizations are power organizations.

Since the receipt and exercising of power is imagined to be connected with forceful behaviour, people cannot any longer identify a power organization. Consequently they do not understand what they are doing and what is happening to them.

As an example, force and influence are contained in the 'emotional blackmail' situation to exactly the same extent as in one where anger or forthrightness are manifested.

When people in authority have the reputation of being kind and soft-hearted, others assume (quite wrongly) that the pressure exerted by such people is not pressure at all. If someone says: 'You must do this because I would be so disappointed if you did not', he is saying exactly the same as 'Do this because I demand that you do it'.

To say that this fact has been observed already is of no importance whatever, because something which has been said or observed and not acted upon is as good as non-existent as a lesson.

People try to exercise power upon those 'below' them. But people upon whom power is supposed to be being exercised are, in fact, by frustrating the effect of that power, themselves exercising power.

Power situations can only exist where there is a contract, arrived at voluntarily or otherwise, in which people will do things or else things can be made difficult for them. 'Do this or I will make you uncomfortable' is the formula for both types of power: the power exerted by people above on those below, and the power exerted from the people below upon those above.

Where there is no such contract – where one party can do without the other –
NO POWER SITUATION CAN EXIST. (33)

- o One of the clearest examples of the misuse of power is humanity's attitude toward and exploitation of the resources of the natural world.

The notion of power grows inevitably out of a dualistic interpretation of reality. When dualism neglects to recognize the presence of an integrating principle behind it, its native penchant for destruction exhibits itself rampantly and wantonly.

One of the most conspicuous examples of this display of power is seen in the Western attitude toward Nature. Westerners talk about conquering Nature and never about befriending her. They climb a high mountain and they declare the mountain is conquered. They succeed in shooting a certain type of projectile heavenwards and then claim that they have conquered the air. Why do they not say that they are now better acquainted with Nature? Unfortunately, the hostility-concept is penetrating every corner of the world and people talk about "control," "conquest," "conditioning," and the like. (34)

- o The exercise of authority comes with certain responsibilities in order for the function of power to be properly carried out.

When a person has power and does not undertake its responsibilities himself, instead expecting others to obey his orders, he always becomes trivial.

There is nobody more trivial than a person in authority who spends his time telling others what to do and who does not do things himself.

This is because, although in appearance this man or woman is powerful or 'above this and that', he is really below it and is not taking any real part in the exercise of a function. Merely to give orders is not a constructive function. But, since it is imagined that the person who gives orders is in some way more important, people do not register the evident fact that such people fall into two types: those who are really stretching themselves and those who are simply 'little caesars.'

The corrective – and it is an instant one – for becoming trivial, ineffective and disliked through exercising meddling authority is for the individual himself to undertake some part of executive action. He should also alternate, sometimes doing some of the work instead of organizing it and expecting others always to do it.

The common development of trivial people at the top – when it is frequently said, 'The great are small-minded' is due to this system being in operation without its corrective. (35)

- o The political and economic structure in the world today produce tension and social imbalances which are detrimental to higher human growth and development.

Various areas of the world are in different stages of development and evolution. Political and economic conditions probably influence people most because political and economic situations also influence social situations.

Unfortunately, present-day economic and political situations are producing enormous tension almost everywhere in the world, and tension is the great enemy: it blocks the balanced and harmonious transmission of energy and it prevents its harmonious use. This happens in individuals: you can see it. Individuals compose groups, and groups compose countries, so the tension increases.

It is the responsibility of people in contact with the Tradition to maintain their tranquillity in tension situations. Nevertheless, you are not responsible for saving the whole population of the area in which you live: you are responsible for your family, your group and those who are close and dear to you, so in a very positive way, you have to protect them.

The signals coming from all parts of the world point to increasing tension. Social imbalance, economic problems, political pushing and fighting for position produce constant changes in balance.

Up to quite recently, the amount of positive or negative influence of a country was judged by its size or its wealth. Nowadays almost any country, however small, can create tension or terror situations. The human balance which used to be maintained has been lost. Various countries make political claims against other countries: they back up these claims by force of arms and no matter how small these countries are, they will be encouraged or backed by one country or another.

How does this situation influence the Tradition? It does not directly influence

the Tradition, but it influences people in the Tradition. The degree of tension is so high on this planet at the moment that any natural or industrial disaster creates a wave of fear throughout the world: nobody really trusts their rulers or heads of state. The average person doesn't understand the international political poker game, and if people don't understand a thing they get nervous about it. (36)

- o The exercise of power to accomplish goals and objectives is ultimately self-defeating and destructive. "Those who are power intoxicated fail to see that power is blinding and keeps them within an ever-narrowing horizon."

The real truth is that love is not opposed to power; love belongs to an order higher than power, and it is only power that imagines itself to be opposed to love. In truth, love is all-enveloping and all-forgiving; it is a universal solvent, an infinitely creative and resourceful agent. As power is always dualistic and therefore rigid, self-assertive, destructive, and annihilating, it turns against itself and destroys itself when it has nothing to conquer. This is in the nature of power and, and is it not this that we are witnessing today, particularly in our international affairs.

What is blind is not love but power, for power utterly fails to see that its existence is dependent upon something else. It refuses to realize that it can be itself only allying itself to something infinitely greater than itself. Not knowing this fact, power plunges itself straight into the pit of self-destruction. (37)

Restriction of Human Possibilities and Development

'Two main forces are used by those who have no insight. The first force is that of the Men of Power, who kill, punish and harm. The second is that of the People of Learning, who use deceit, hypocrisy and heresy.'

Idries Shah

- o Cultural assumptions and beliefs define our reality and limit human capacity and the understanding of life. In the ordinary world, people are trained and conditioned to operate and learn in ways connected with only a small range of ambitions and desires, a process which helps to vitiate higher ranges of perception and understanding.
- o The mental framework of Western thought is largely a scientific and technological one. It produces an intellectual climate which needs to experience the challenge of a variety of many-sided and many-levelled insights essential for further human progress.

The Sufis use a new point of view in order to overcome the conditioning which our materialistic society has imposed. Our ills are due mainly to the one-sided rationalism of our culture and the loss of the intuitive faculty that would have enabled us to gain access to an area of knowledge which cannot be reached through the intellectual mechanism. They believe that for the first time in history conscious evolution has ceased to be a choice open to man and has become a necessity on which our future depends. (38)

- o The assumptions of society and the effect of dominating institutions and ideas can effectively prevent the development of real understanding. “Cultural systems are not comprehensive and are incomplete because they do not exist in depth.”

In societies, for instance, where the tradition is that people cannot know more about themselves because that is a reserved area confined to, say, priests or seers, the subconscious belief is that one must not attempt to go further.

This behaviour is sometimes imagined to be duty or proper behaviour. It is useful enough in the right place, but positively disabling where flexibility is needed.

The official barriers may be institutions, traditions or social norms, producing what contemporary psychologists call an inhibition. (39)

- o Human systems tend to concentrate on a narrow range of possibilities directly related to their aim. This process automatically excludes other, potentially very valuable, directions and opportunities. “Structures originally built for one kind of thinking, or by people who think in a certain way, will always produce – like plants – the same kind of fruit. ‘Everything returns to its origin’.”

The fact is, of course, that for practical purposes *all* systems which exist for furthering a purpose also succeed, almost by definition, in excluding many other possibilities: unless *you* add the extra dimensions – the system won’t. You may make a lot of money in a business, but this can be at the expense of developing your interests in other directions. If you go in for clinical research, you may not be able to do as much therapy as otherwise might be possible. If you need the social support given you by any kind of a system to which you belong to an extreme degree, you will be inhibited from leaving it, even temporarily, in order to do things in areas where there is no social support: thus reducing your effectiveness. Speaking candidly, this means that you will be unable to go forward because your needs command you to spin on your own axis to maintain some kind of equilibrium. (40)

- o Contemporary cultures are the recipients of both the wisdom and the failings of previous generations. “It is the stupidity and shallowness of some of our forebears which punishes us, just as much as the endowment of the wiser ones offers us opportunities.”
- o Most human societies have been restricted by conventions and belief-systems which have mitigated against an advanced understanding of humanity by mystical methods and procedures.

Until very recently, as you will see if you have read books on human cultures and have any acquaintance with existing groups, including religious and psychological ones, human institutions have tended to be what can only be called restrictive. That is to say, although they want to increase information and to develop capacities, they leave great areas unstudied. There is a disposition to assume that certain attitudes must not be taken up in their particular system, otherwise such attitudes might threaten the stability or even the very life of the sacrosanct institution. The unenlightened search for the ‘social good’ tends to be restrictive. The result of this narrowing of the thinking is to make the person involved in it *less* effective, *more* mechanical, more prone to look for systems. (41)

- o There is a progression in human growth which is mirrored by the level of development of communities, institutions and organizations.

There are three convenient stages of human growth: infancy, adolescence and adulthood, which provide us with an adequate comparison standard for three stages of community development.

In the first, visible crudity and destructivity is evident. This is childhood, equivalent to the conquest of territory in the community's life.

The second is characterized by intense emotion, mental activity and insistence upon objectives. Its equivalent is the 'derivative baronial' phase. Instead of conquering national territories, its spread is in domination of the brain (propaganda and publicity) and in energy concentration – commercial and industrial empires.

Communities of all social, political and economic labels operate these systems.

The third type, which is the final phase, and the most effective and constructive, is an organization which can contribute in so many fields that it cannot be singled out as an enemy, or even as a friend, for its members come from every section of every community. By providing positive and demonstrable gains in such diverse fields as literature, commerce, art, science, psychology and human thought and social relations, it penetrates throughout the interstices of the existing relatively crude systems. (42)

- o As the spiritual life ripens there is a natural reorientation and simplification of behaviour in response to the requirements of the everyday world.

As the desire for the spiritual increases, all social life becomes less binding, and a much simpler adaptation is sooner or later established. As soon as man really awakens to spiritual life, certain incompatible conditions become unbearable, unacceptable, and he then lets go of certain things, he changes his profession, he re-adapts himself; such a re-adaptation must be neither forced nor willed and, above all, not anticipated. It happens naturally and spontaneously as the spiritual orientation asserts itself clearly. (43)

- o As awareness deepens the pull of the outer world of society and culture weakens, allowing a more authentic natural human being to emerge.

Man is a prisoner of his social sphere. He is governed by social events. He disperses himself. He loses himself. He cannot return to his integral state. In this case, to be aware of what one does, of what one says, of what one thinks, is to begin to resist invasion by the surroundings and by all the errors to which forgetfulness gives birth. When the lamp of the Awareness of Being is lit, moral conscience lights up; and the passage of thoughts and emotions likewise is lit up. Respect for oneself is re-established, the shadows of illusion can no longer invade a man. From this fact, spiritual force is concentrated and develops. You wash your hands, you dress yourself, you perform everyday actions as before; but now you are *aware* of all your actions, words and thoughts. (44)

- o Many traditional spiritual teachings offer a spiritually-based alternative to the dominant materialistic societies of the modern world. “Society as it is now, with its framework of laws and customs, is based on the idea of a separate and responsible personality, but this is not the only form a society can take.”

The Buddhist Way, with its compassion, equanimity, tolerance, concern for self-reliance and responsibility – above all, its Cosmic view – can be a model for society.

What are needed are political and economic relations and a technology that will: (a) help people to overcome ego-centeredness through cooperation with others instead of subordination, exploitation, and competition; (b) offer to each a freedom that is conditional only upon the freedom of others, so that individuals may develop a self-reliant social responsibility rather than being the conditioned pawns of institutions and ideologies; (c) concern themselves primarily with the material and social conditions of personal growth and only secondarily with material production. (45)

- o Although sources of authentic wisdom do exist on earth, they may be ‘hidden’ or kept from humanity until certain conditions and times are correct for their proper assimilation.

Was it possible, I asked myself, that a form of ancient knowledge of any importance to the human race still lingered in the under-developed and at times unattractive East? I brought up this matter with Murat.

He smiled. ‘Your difficulty is that you find it hard to believe that a people possessed of anything of value could be so materially backward. Or that anything still remains secret in this world, when mass-communications are used to reproduce and spew forth knowledge in every form. But you do not realize that what you call this “ancient knowledge” may be of a kind which cannot yet be given to the world.’

‘How can there be a time to give something to the world, and a time to withhold it?’

‘If you give chemicals to a child he will destroy himself. When he is a man, he will use them constructively, perhaps in some industry.’

I said that I did not feel that he could patronise me like that without some evidence.

‘It is not for me to give you evidence of anything. If a child says to you, “Give me evidence of the dangers of the chemicals you are said to possess,” you are not obliged to do so.’ (46)

- o Most human beings see only the negative effects of economic, political and social tension and are unable to perceive the hidden pattern of spiritual laws which underlie these phenomena.

In the last hundred years this process of constant and explosive change on the social and institutional level has accelerated to a degree unknown to people of earlier ages. Almost daily the newspapers report new and dizzying crises in the world: famines and natural disasters, wars and revolutions; crises in the environment, in energy and in the political arena; crises in the world of finance and economics; crises in the piling up of divorces and nervous breakdowns, not to

speak of crises in personal health.

The average person looking out on this ever-changing world sees anything but natural karmic laws at work; nor does he see the unity and harmony underlying this constant and inevitable change. If anything, he is filled with fear and anxiety, with a feeling of hopelessness, and with a sense that life has no meaning. And because he has no concrete insight into the true character of the world or intuitive understanding of it, what else can he do but surrender to a life of material comfort and sensual pleasure. (47)

o The antidote to the ills of contemporary civilization is a return to a more natural, organic life in harmony with all creation.

We need to recover our basic humanity. The choice before us is clear: a disciplined life of simplicity and naturalness or a contrived and artificial one; a life in harmony with the natural order of things or one in constant conflict with it. It is a choice of freedom or bondage, growth or decay. But even having chosen the way of regeneration, to walk this path requires spiritual training and discipline. Only through purifying the heart and mind of each of us can we hope to purify the world and restore a measure of peace and stability in our global community. (48)

REFERENCES

1. Emir Ali Khan “Sufi Activity” in Sufi Thought and Action (Ed. Idries Shah) (London: Octagon Press, 1990), p. 43.
2. Idries Shah Learning How to Learn (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 110-1.
3. Najib Siddiqi “In a Sufi Monastery: Conversations with a Dervish” in Sufi Thought and Action (Ed. Idries Shah) (London: Octagon Press, 1990), p. 249.
4. Stuart Litvak Seeking Wisdom: The Sufi Path (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1984), p. 64.
5. Idries Shah A Perfumed Scorpion (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 58-9.
6. Idries Shah A Perfumed Scorpion (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 138-9.
7. Idries Shah The Commanding Self (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 265.
8. Jean Klein I Am (Santa Barbara: Third Millennium Publications, 1989), p. 148-9.
9. Idries Shah “Current Study Materials” in The World of the Sufi (Ed. Idries Shah) (London: Octagon Press, 1979), p. 271-2.
10. Idries Shah Knowing How to Know (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p. 106-7.
11. Idries Shah Knowing How to Know (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p. 158-9.
12. Idries Shah Reflections (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 20.
13. Jean Klein Who Am I? (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1988), p. 6.
14. Idries Shah Knowing How to Know (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p. 43.
15. Thomas Cleary Zen Essence (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), p. 82.
16. Idries Shah Learning How to Learn (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 158.
17. Jean Klein Who Am I? (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1988), p. 9.
18. Toni Packer The Light of Discovery (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1999), p. 108.
19. Idries Shah The Commanding Self (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 233-4.
20. Idries Shah Neglected Aspects of Sufi Study (London: Octagon Press, 1989), p. 35-6.
21. Leonard Lewin “Sufi Studies: East and West” in The World of the Sufi (Ed. Idries Shah) (London: Octagon Press, 1979), p. 242-3.
22. Philip Kapleau Awakening to Zen (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 37-8.
23. Idries Shah The Commanding Self (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 239.
24. Stuart Litvak Seeking Wisdom: The Sufi Path (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1984), p. 3-4.
25. Idries Shah The Commanding Self (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 63.
26. Idries Shah Reflections (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 10.
27. Jean Klein Who Am I? (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1988), p. 11.
28. Lewis Courtland “A Visit to Idries Shah” in The Diffusion of Sufi Ideas in the West (Ed. Leonard Lewin) p. 126.
29. Idries Shah The Commanding Self (London: Octagon Press, 1994), p. 238.
30. Omar Ali-Shah Sufism For Today (New York: Alif Publishing, 1993), p. 104..
31. Idries Shah Observations (London: Designist Communications, 1982), p. 27.
32. Elizabeth Hall “A Conversation with Idries Shah” Psychology Today July 1975, p. 59-60.
33. Idries Shah Knowing How to Know (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p. 79-80.
34. D.T. Suzuki Awakening to Zen (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 68.
35. Idries Shah Knowing How to Know (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p. 81.
36. Omar Ali-Shah The Course of the Seeker (Reno: Tractus Books, 1996), p. 194-5.
37. D.T. Suzuki Awakening to Zen (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 69.
38. Giovanna de Garayalde Jorge Luis Borges: Sources and Illumination (London: Octagon Press, 1978), p. 18.
39. Idries Shah Evenings with Idries Shah (London: Designist Communications, 1981), p. 19-20.
40. Idries Shah A Perfumed Scorpion (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 139-40.
41. Idries Shah A Perfumed Scorpion (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 129.

42. Idries Shah Knowing How to Know (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p.157.
43. Jean Klein Be Who You Are (Dorset, England: Element Books, 1989), p. 37.
44. Thich Nhat Hanh Zen Keys (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), p. 22.
45. Philip Kapleau Awakening to Zen (New York: Scribner, 1987), p. 97.
46. O.M. Burke Among the Dervishes (London: Octagon Press, 1984), p. 58-9.
47. Philip Kapleau Awakening to Zen (New York: Scribner, 1987), p. 31.
48. Philip Kapleau Awakening to Zen (New York: Scribner, 1987), p. 97.