

## A LIVING ORGANIC SPIRITUAL TEACHING

*'We work in all places and at all times.'*  
Saying

### Flexibility and Adaptability

The 'Great Teaching' is universal and timeless in its essential nature, although its forms may alter as it adapts to changing circumstances. Such a developmental teaching is a living entity, essentially applicable at all times and in all circumstances, and is able to operate within any culture and in any language: *'The clothes may vary, but the person is the same.'*

The actual position and intention of the Tradition does not change, but it must have some flexibility because of changing social, geographical, political and other considerations. In former times we used verbal and other communications which were correct for the time. In primitive times we used primitive techniques, even though we had more sophisticated techniques which we could have used. The reason primitive techniques were used was because there was nothing strange or hostile about them. (1)

The Teaching is conveyed in response to the needs of the community to which it is directed. It presents itself in a form which is perceptible and comprehensible to each person in direct accordance with their individual needs and capacities. "People differ at different times – what is appropriate for one person in one civilization may not be useful for another. Conditions of life change, understandings progress and regress, and the 'ground' on which the Teaching is based changes. Since it is a 'growing, organic process,' it becomes different in different eras."

The principle of 'time, place and people' refers to projecting a teaching afresh in each time and culture, in accordance with the real characteristics of a situation. The outward shape of the inner teaching is constantly reformulated in a 'fresh adaptation' to maintain relevance and effectiveness within a given culture and community:

Q: How can you explain the many forms in which people have attempted to teach? If certain forms through which studies are carried are true, are all others false?

A: Traditionally, this question is answered as follows:

- Truth has no form;
- The means through which people may perceive Truth have forms;
- All forms are limited; some of these limitations are time, place, culture and language;
- Different forms are not necessarily antagonistic, for the above reason;

- Forms have changed through the centuries in obedience to the external world to which all forms belong;
- When people believe that the form is more important than the Truth, they will not find the Truth, but will stay with form;
- Forms are vehicles and instruments, and vehicles and instruments cannot be called good or bad without context;
- Forms outlive their usefulness, increase or diminish in usefulness. (2)

One of the reasons why the formulation of a teaching must change in accordance with time and circumstances is to prevent indoctrination and conditioning. “Ancient systems do not work in modern times. They may train people to believe certain things but have little developmental value. No true system is ancient although the knowledge upon which it is based is ancient. The trappings, formulae, externals must alter, sometimes frequently, if its operational efficacy is to be preserved.”

The existence of so many bodies of teaching, in so many cultures and epochs, with so many different outward forms is a manifestation of original groups which were tailored for the community of that place, that time, that teacher. Of all human activities, the one involving studies beyond ordinary perceptions must above all be projected in accordance with time, place and people; the last includes the direction of the effort, as is well illustrated by this traditional teaching story:

Terribly afraid one dark night, Mulla Nasrudin travelled with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. He had been told that these were a sure means of protection. On the way he was met by a robber, who took his donkey and saddle-bag full of valuable books. The next day, as he was bemoaning his fate in the tea-house, someone asked: “But why did you let him get away with your possessions, Mulla? Did you not have the means to deter him?” “If my hands had not been full,” said the Mulla, “it would have been a different story.” (3)

The importance of renewal and supersession is illustrated by an important adage: *‘That which is introduced into the domain of Time will fall victim to the ravages of Time.’* For this reason a living teaching is adaptive and evolutionary – it is not intended to subsist within a particular culture or society in an unaltered form. “A school of higher development comes into being, like any other natural factor, in order to flourish and disappear, not to leave traces in mechanical ritual, or anthropologically interesting relics. The function of a nutrient is to become transmuted, not to leave unaltered traces.”

The external forms of an organic teaching will always change in response to the needs and situation of a learning community. Its outer forms, such as literature, exercises, techniques and so on, are ‘working frames’ which are transient, systematized only for limited periods of time. When their effective life-span is completed, others take their place to ensure the continuity of the Tradition. Thus the saying: *‘The workshop is dismantled after the work is finished.’*

The concept of supersession is illustrated by an analogy to the use of lower dimensions (such as things of this world) in order to ultimately transcend those dimensions:

It has often been objected that it is absurd to use something in order to transcend that very thing. Yet the smallest example from ordinary life will surely show that this is what we are doing all the time. For instance, if you teach someone to count, starting with piles of stones in order to end up with the relatively abstract Arabic numerical figures, you may be said to have employed the concrete to get to the abstract, and to have used stones as something which you are determined to supersede. If you do not do this, of course, keeping the constant awareness of the supersession factor in front of you, your learning system is in danger of becoming fossilized. You get conditioned to *stones*. (4)

There is a natural tendency for spiritual teachings to deviate from their original intention and purpose once they have been transmitted to a specific community or culture. “It is an evident fact that true groups and organizations ‘run down’ and develop peculiarities other than were present in their origins. They may do this because of the ascendancy of the undesirable characteristics in the participants, or because there is a widespread tendency for people and groups to attempt to stabilize themselves by using the nearest available organization, irrespective of whether this kind of stabilization loses more than it gains.” Spiritual systems from the past tend to follow a descending arc of effectiveness leading to mechanical repetition and conditioned behaviour. This is one of the major reasons why the Teaching must be constantly renewed from its source:

Q: Is there any value in studying the teachings and activities of systems of the past? Some of them have died out, and some seem to belong to a past era, not applicable today.

A: There is value in studying those which do have contemporary application. That means, of course, that the only people who can indicate which body of material – or what part of a body of material – to study are those who understand what they meant, for whom they were intended, and what their effect was designed to be. This, in turn, means that mere imitation is useless. Real study is prescription, not imitation or even tradition. (5)

## **Expression and Influence in the World**

Throughout history higher knowledge has been transmitted by enlightened teachers to virtually every culture and society in the world. The process of ‘conscious evolution’ has been maintained for countless millennia and still continues in a contemporary form, adapted to the needs of the times, following the dictum: ‘*Speak to everyone in accordance with their degree of understanding.*’ According to tradition, the guardians and exponents of this ancient spiritual

teaching accumulate, concentrate and circulate knowledge of human transformation much as bees collect and store honey, which is then released as 'food' or 'nourishment.'

It is believed that human affairs (and the ebb and flow of history) are subject to a conscious influence and purposeful direction by initiates who have achieved a higher level of consciousness and understanding. "Such intervention occurs periodically in every aspect of human life – not excluding the physical sciences, psychology, charity, art and social organizations." There are suggestions and indications of a hidden influence behind human history which is concerned with the evolutionary development of the whole human race:

Tradition asserts that for thousands of years there has been an "Inner Circle of Humanity" capable of thinking in terms of millennia and possessing knowledge and powers of a high order. Its members intervene from time to time in human affairs. They do this, not as leaders or teachers of mankind, but unobtrusively by introducing certain ideas and techniques. This intervention works in such a way as to rectify deviations from the predestined course of human history. This inner circle, it is claimed, concentrates its activities in those areas and at those times when the situation is critical for mankind. (6)

A wide range of modalities have been utilized to disseminate inner developmental influences to communities, many of which do not appear 'spiritual' to the external observer. These forms include: music, dance, teaching stories and tales, literature, cultural and commercial projects, craft guilds and artistic creations, humanitarian and social welfare efforts, education, and religious and philosophical endeavours. The range and types of activities are often surprising and unsuspected by the outside observer: spiritual adepts have been responsible for "founding and funding charitable foundations, businesses, sporting activities and agricultural enterprises. They have been in government and local administration, in law and medicine, in engineering, in the arts and sciences, in the diplomatic world and in scientific research."

The dissemination of inner teachings of spiritual transformation follow a process of movement from one region to another based on 'organic necessity' and a conscious perception of the needs of a given culture, society or community:

The 'Work' has been concentrated in the East for many centuries for very real and definite reasons. One of them is geographical or physical. Another is that the community, in general, contains, in a form of transmitted cultural values, important elements which can be used in furthering man's development . . . From time to time, there has been a movement of inner teachings from the East to the West. This has been part of an organic necessity. Few people know how and why this process has worked. At the present moment there is a process of this kind, only of immeasurably greater import, at work. From time to time, let us say, it becomes necessary to graft a plant upon the root which has been growing somewhere, whose own fruit has ceased to propagate itself. It can

also become necessary to plant a root, an entire root, in a place, in order for the necessities of this human development to find their intended function and expression. (7)

The Tradition has influenced both Eastern and Western civilizations throughout history, penetrating and ‘fertilizing’ all kinds of societies irrespective of their nominal social or religious beliefs. The way in which spiritual teachings are imported into a culture determines their effectiveness and usefulness:

Should something which belongs to one culture not – in the metaphysical sphere – be imported to another? It must be immediately noted that the relevant factor here is whether the import belongs uniquely to the culture from which it was imported, or whether it does not. If I import a *habit*, like wearing sandals, from Greece, where it is hot to Greenland where it is cold, I am doing the wrong sort of importing. If, on the other hand, I import something of use, like wool, from a place where it grows to a place where it can be used, I am probably doing something useful. (8)

One of the characteristics of an organic teaching is the penetrative power and inner dynamism of its esoteric ideas to influence the thought and activities of diverse communities. Correct conditions must exist for the introduction and naturalization of a higher teaching in a given community. When such conditions are met, the current of higher knowledge is diffused and transmitted to the receiving culture in the form of ‘seed-ideas’ which penetrate all levels of society.

Higher spiritual teachings act as a nutrient, leavening or ‘yeast’ within human society, contributing to world knowledge and cultural development. The stream of higher knowledge is continuous, transmitted from the past to the present day in a new form and a fresh adaptation. The actual method of operation and beneficial influence of higher knowledge in a community is sometimes given expression in the form of a metaphor:

There is a graphic example of how we operate in the Tradition: we call it the “oil-spot.” Imagine you have a piece of blank white paper and you dribble separate drops of oil all over it. Given the correct circumstances, all these drops will slowly and gradually coalesce and finally cover the whole paper. We call it oil-spot because those drops correspond to drops of energy, which spread out, diffuse, and change the nature of the paper or basic material. In some places or in some circumstances one may want to accelerate the process, and one therefore puts the drops more closely together. This is one of the ways in which we can and do operate in the world today: communication between individuals, between groups, on all levels, by all techniques. (9)

One of the functions of the Teaching is to operate in areas which are unfamiliar or have been neglected in the host community. “Cultures can be invigorated by filling some interstices with

possibilities for enlargement of individual and cultural possibilities which do not in reality conflict with basic postulates, or which enable the premises to become more flexible.” Tradition asserts that a continuous, altruistic stream of higher influences acts upon humanity and the world, often in an anonymous way: *‘The Way is none other than in the service of the people.’*

A large number of cultural traditions, which may be religious, humanitarian, literary, craft-oriented, artistic or psychological, are seemingly unconnected. They are in fact manifestations of a common activity. This impulse, infusing widely separated national and racial streams, has a mode of action which grafts into existing elements and works with existing materials. The action does not result from any identifiable teaching. It is indirect, a “provoking of action” technique depending for its effect on what would now be called subliminal responses. Its real action is therefore unnoticed and the connection between its many forms in many countries is unsuspected. This applies alike to adherents and to outside observers. (10)

Throughout history higher developmental influences have spread into various cultures in a manner which is largely indirect, quiet and invisible. Groups, organizations and individuals may be engaged in real inner work even though their outward appearance, avowed principles and methods do not resemble spiritual activities. This activity reflects an important principle: *‘The secret protects itself. It is found only in the spirit and practice of the Work.’*

Knowledge of a higher order is continuously in operation in almost every culture and society, but only flourishes within cultural frameworks which permit open expression of ideas and freedom of thought. “The climate, both in the West and elsewhere, especially in those cultures styling themselves as ‘open societies,’ exists wherein higher studies can be presented in a form intelligible to the ordinary man or woman. This is largely because there are comparatively so few barriers to the dissemination of ideas and thoughts, and the people in general are athirst for knowledge.”

The activities and studies of a spiritual school may take any seemingly worldly shape and may bear no obvious resemblance to traditional spiritual or religious forms. “These procedures, materials and ideas may seem to be associated with other creeds, and with practices dating from immemorial times, or they may appear to belong to areas which are not, strictly speaking, metaphysical.” And, a spiritual teacher may not appear or present as such; they are essentially ‘invisible’ to those who judge by externals.

There is an unfortunate human tendency to reject knowledge which is presented in an outer form contrary to expectations. The existence and operation of a school of inner development may be imperceptible to others, and its essential activities be unrecognizable as spiritual by narrowly conditioned people. The would-be student of esoteric teachings must be prepared to abandon assumptions and preconceptions about what constitutes ‘higher studies’ and be prepared to study matters and materials which may not appear to be ‘spiritual.’

In the past higher knowledge could not be projected into certain cultures, especially authoritarian and closed ones, except in secret or disguised form. “Until almost the other day, if we speak in historical terms, the study of anything that was not avowedly devoted to the service of the state or the prevailing ideological commitment (generally a theological one) was regarded as odd and easily labelled subversive.” In order to protect themselves esoteric schools skilfully disguised their actual operation by:

- Hiding their true nature so that their activities were unsuspected by the regime in power; or
- Operating openly but seemingly engaged in activities which appeared innocuous to the official establishment; or
- Appearing to be part of the regime itself.

The most important consideration in projecting a real spiritual teaching is that it works and is actually effective:

A concept, process, technique, curriculum, does not have to be attributed to authority, recorded in prestigious literature, or capable of affording emotional stimulus. Its requirement shall be that it is effective: apt for the individual and the needs of the group. Not therefore, ‘Is it new, does it resolve, or seem to resolve, my psychological problems, does it seem like something which I can believe . . .’ But imperatively: ‘Does it work, and do I have the basis of preparation necessary for it to have a chance to work?’ A major purpose of metaphysical schools is to select and to apply the processes, techniques, curricula and materials which shall apply to a given community, without regard to the superficialities of mere taste, personal inclination and popular demand. It is for this reason – the need to work without compromising with irrelevancies -- that so many serious endeavours of the past and present are carried out in privacy, even in secrecy. (11)

## **Purpose and Nature**

The Teaching constitutes one single unified body or organism as a whole. This unity is invisible at ground level and can only be perceived by those attuned to higher dimensions of reality. Higher knowledge is communicated to, received and assimilated by a community which is attuned to higher Reality. Certain dimensions of life are not readily apparent and, in general, can only be reached through conscious effort under the guidance of a genuine spiritual teacher:

What we see, feel and experience in ordinary, unfulfilled life is only part of the great whole. There are dimensions which we can reach only through effort. Like the submerged portion of the iceberg, they are there, although unperceived under ordinary conditions. Also like the iceberg, they are far greater than could be expected by superficial study. Rumi uses several analogies to explain this.

One of his most striking is his theory of action. There is, he says, such a thing as comprehensive action, and there is also individual action. We are accustomed to seeing, in the ordinary world of sense, only individual action. Supposing a number of people are making a tent. Some sew, others prepare the ropes, some again weave. They are all taking part in a comprehensive action, although each is absorbed in his individual action. If we are thinking about the making of the tent, it is the comprehensive action of the whole group which is important. In certain directions, life must be looked upon as a whole, as well as individually. This getting into tune with the whole plan, the comprehensive action of life, is essential to enlightenment. (12)

The Teaching forms a total comprehensive activity which cannot be examined or understood piecemeal. It contains an impalpable element (sometimes called *Baraka*) which means 'the subtlety,' and cannot be easily demonstrated without proper preparation and correct alignment to the greater dimensions of Reality. Any systematization of a spiritual teaching must follow the rules of flexibility, adaptability and organic necessity:

Q: But surely there is a system?

A: You do not know what a 'system' is. The Work is really systematized at a level much higher than intellect as you know it. Any apparent systematization is merely a working frame, connected to the purpose of bringing the teaching a little nearer to you. It does not have universal validity. The system is known by the teacher and equally developed people, just as you know something so well that you act in accordance with its inevitability. This work is natural, organic and changes form, not content, in accordance with the needs of the people, the work and the teacher. What serves as a system in one phase of the Work is not a system in the other. (13)

A spiritual teaching cannot be artificially grafted onto an existing culture, community or group, but rather must acclimatize itself in response to existing conditions. If there is a real need then it takes root naturally as part of an organic, natural development. A teacher will introduce or modify activities and exercises in response to changing circumstances and the needs of the time, while remaining faithful to the central core of the spiritual teachings: "Since the Tradition and the people who compose the Tradition live and work in the world, and since the character and nature of the Tradition is above all developmental, methods and techniques can be modified to take into consideration things which have developed outside."

The Teaching is part of a living, organic evolution which comes into being and grows in a special manner based on a comprehensive design. "This organic movement is much like a plant in which messages are received when they are necessary in accordance with certain essential requirements. For example, if the plant needs more water it calls for water and water comes up from the roots to the stem and so on." In the same way genuine spiritual teachings have an evolutionary dimension:

All religion is subject to development. To the Sufi, the evolution of the Sufi is within himself and also in his relationship with society. The development of the community, and the destination of all creation – including even nominally inanimate creation – is interwoven with the destiny of the Sufi. He may have to detach himself for a period from society – for a moment, a month, or even more – but ultimately he is interlinked with the eternal whole. The Sufi's importance, therefore, is immense and his actions and appearance to others will seem to vary in accordance with human and extra-human needs. Jalaluddin Rumi emphasizes the evolutionary nature of human effort, which is true in both the individual and the group: "I died as inert matter and became a plant. As a plant I died and became an animal. I died as an animal and became a human being. So why should I fear losing my human character. I shall die as a human, to rise in 'angelic' form." (14)

There is an overall plan or design for the Teaching that dictates the nature of its activity and expression in a given community at a given time. "The human community is involved in an evolutionary movement. The existence of the teacher and the community in a given place is connected by cosmic laws, with a necessity of the community."

Techniques have been developed over the centuries with time, place and circumstance taken into consideration. Each activity or technique is applied by the person in charge of an area of activity according to the time and the need. These may constantly change, and thus the director of the activity must be constantly in touch with the main plan of activity. Only activity that is carried out in step with the main plan is valid activity. Haphazard application of half-heard or semi-understood truths can lead to nothing except confusion, loss of time and sometimes actually retrograde movement. (15)

Higher human development is dependent upon the harmonization and alignment of human aspiration with cosmological cycles and patterns: "Changes in the terrestrial pattern require changes in apparent organization. This is the main reason for successive changes in the presentation of Higher Teachings in different communities and epochs. Terrestrial organizations, by assuming certain characteristics of the Ultimate, help to make communication, which has been interrupted, possible."

From time to time, certain cosmological and human factors being in alignment, there is both a need for and a possibility to re-establish, by means of a special and skilled effort, formulations and activities which maximize the prospects of more rapid and thorough penetration of the teaching which leads to the development referred to as 'knowing oneself' or 'having wisdom.' Several such periods, cyclic in character, have occurred in recent times: none of them has been generally recognized for what it is. This is not to say that because one believes this one is automatically able to find it. The correct approach is everything. (16)

The higher Teaching is said to be a living unity in which past, present and future are in some mysterious way connected: "Every Sufi who is living today represents every Sufi who has lived in the past, or who will ever live. The same amount of 'baraka' is there, and immemorial tradition does not increase its romance, which remains constant."

The Tradition contains work for the future as well as the present. There is a line of descent of authorized teaching which passes the inner knowledge to future generations: '*Others sowed for me, I sow for others to come.*' Spiritual teachers work, in part, to maintain the continuity of the tradition and community of seekers. The concept of a continuous transmission means that each teacher is the living representative of an unbroken chain of transmission. "Present-day or future teachers will update the techniques, but not the basic teaching. They project it according to the needs of the circumstances." Esoteric tradition affirms that there is a group of high initiates who influence the course of human events and history:

This doctrine and the manner of its application have been known and propagated from time immemorial. They are, in fact, the property and destiny of man. They link with a past in which this development was much more widely known, through a present where it has fallen into disuse except for a few, to a future in which The Great Work will be the entire legitimate goal of mankind. (17)

## References

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