

SEEKER AFTER TRUTH

*'I fear that you will not reach Mecca, O Traveller –
For the road which you are following leads to Turkestan.'*

Saadi

Attraction to Cults

'Like attracts like'

Saying

- o Many seekers of higher knowledge and wisdom are attracted to religious and metaphysical systems which in reality are deteriorated traditions lacking inner developmental value.
- o Most cults have defining characteristics which actually prevent learning and progress in the spiritual domain. “Many cults are often groups which attract the unbalanced and unbalance those prone to such directions.”

The law, one might call it, is that series of ideas become crystallized in people's minds by selective adoption, into what can only be called cults. There is always the authority-figure, the canonical literature, the hierarchy, the myth, the locality, the sacred this and that. This formulation inhibits rather than makes possible, real teaching and development. Almost all institutions seek to further these mechanical elements (even if they deny them), as the 'blood and bones of organization'. But they do not know that it is bricks and mortar only of a limited kind of construct, a non-organic one, one might call it, referring to the difference in vitality and sophistication as between a building and a plant. (1)

- o The would-be student of higher knowledge must recognize that most 'spiritual' organizations are conscious or unconscious conditioning instruments. “It is as it were a trap laid for the ignoble element in you when a man, a book, a ceremonial, an organization, a method, appears, directly or by recommendation, to have something which is applicable to all, or attracts you strongly though incorrectly.”
- o One of the great difficulties for most spiritual aspirants is distinguishing between real and false spiritual teachers and teachings. According to the Sufi master Rumi: 'Counterfeit gold exists because there is such a thing as real gold.'

Since there are so many people all over the world claiming that they are spiritual teachers, many of those who want to follow them – and those who want to refute them – spend much time trying to work out which are real ones and which are not.

What is rather remarkable is that a great many of these self-styled teachers are discernibly not teachers, if studied with the normal rational apparatus which is of

some value even to seekers after truth.

There is a story about a man who went up to another one who was selling what he described as 'the most delicious and irreplaceable honey in the world' in a market-place. 'If it is so marvelous,' he asked, 'why are you selling it?'

'I wouldn't try, you may be sure,' answered the honey-seller, 'if a mouse hadn't fallen into it!'

Now, in spiritual matters it may be claimed that the seeker, however sincere, cannot tell whether there is a mouse in the honey of the teaching which he is offered. But if he would only steel himself to look at the honey with dead mice floating on top, he would start to learn how to recognize the real thing. If you can test a verifiable counterfeit, you will eventually find a coin which is gold. (2)

o Almost by definition the seeker is unable to evaluate the comparative worth of the various spiritual paths available in the world today.

The Way requires:

1. A teacher, who has been that way before;
2. The individual whose consciousness is correctly oriented, so that he can make use of the material which is given to him;
3. A group of such people.

To this extent, then, the Way does partake of the nature of enterprises carried on in the familiar social context. All of the three factors must operate correctly in order to make possible the transition of the human consciousness from its crude state to the refinement which is needed before the individual and the group reach the stage where they can be called either integrated minds or conscious people.

Certain physical conditions are necessary even before such a situation (a teaching situation) can exist. 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. There is, in fact, an organic situation of which the psychological position is merely a part.

The average man, seeking 'knowledge' or 'enlightenment', does not pause to wonder whether these conditions exist. In general, he has not the first conception of this fact. He does not even wonder whether he is inherently or otherwise equipped for the undertaking of 'improving himself'.

The consequences of this disastrous shortcoming follows all too fatefully.

He continues to revolve in circular thinking, deceived by the seeming variety of 'ways' of human development or improvement into thinking that he has a varied life and experience. He may shun all the 'ways'; he may dabble with many of them. In no case is he generally equipped to do either thing. But he has the absurd notion that he is.

He has absolutely no objective yardstick with which to measure or assess:

- 1) What he needs;
- 2) How to get it;
- 3) What is true;
- 4) What is false.

He knows some or all of these things only in certain limited senses.

This does not prevent him from pretending to himself and others either that he does know, or that he could know. This is self-deception. We call it 'lying'. (3)

- o The seeker must learn to distinguish the difference between outer form or appearance (sometimes called traditionalism) and the living reality of a legitimate, contemporary spiritual tradition.

There is all the difference in the world between tradition and traditionalism. As we use the terms, traditionalism is doing something because others have done it, whether we understand it or not, whether it applies in a given culture, time-scale, etc., or not. It may be simply dogmatism. Tradition itself enshrines the functional part of which traditionalism is the husk. (4)

- o There is a crucial distinction between what people *want* and what they actually *need* for their spiritual development. For the two to coincide, there must be a certain degree and quality of knowledge. Cults almost always ignore this important difference.

- o The psychological condition of many people propels them to seek out cults rather than legitimate spiritual teachings, since the cults readily provide the social stabilization and reassurance which they unconsciously crave. They have been described as ‘cultists looking for a cult’.

There is a law of diminishing returns in spiritual teaching, as in all human ideas, whereby people will tend to accept from a teaching what they fancy they want. This is generally release from worry, increase of perplexity, hero-worship, certitude, emotional indulgence. They treat the teaching in the same manner that they treat any other ‘food’: they settle for short-term gains. (5)

- o People who lack sincerity and insight are drawn to cults and secondary teachings. “Those who are diverted to frauds and performers are those who seek ‘less than Truth’, and they are finding it.”

Q: How does one know whether a teacher or an organization is fully authoritative?

A: It is not a matter of describing *how* one knows, as this cannot be described. It is a matter of stating that people always know.

Q: Then why do they follow spurious or ineffective people and cults?

A: For the same reason that people buy false bargains offered by deceivers. The reason is that they know, inwardly, that the offer is false. Their own inner falsity answers, and they find their affinity.

Q: But does this not mean that you are saying that nobody can be trapped by false things as every trapped person is himself dishonest?

A: No, it does not mean this at all.

Q: Then what can it possibly mean?

A: Not only does it not mean what you imagine, but it demonstrably means that there is a true part and a false part to everyone. Whoever extends the false part

will perceive through his or her own falsity, and will be able to perceive only the false. (6)

- o Spiritual teachings inevitably deteriorate over time and must be renewed, through a process of supersession, from the original, living source. The typical spiritual seeker is almost always unaware of this fact and tends to follow a teaching which is no longer applicable to the current situation and contemporary time.

Very similar is the situation of the Eastern and Western followers of outdated mystical and spiritual systems. Because they lack information as to the transitory nature of local presentations – for instance dervish dancing or reciting mantrams – they follow ideas and practices which are not only unfruitful: they cause them to misinterpret the truth when they do come across it.

Hence the importance of understanding supersession.

The importance of seeking for teaching in the right places is seen in the usage – or misusing – of literature and practices which do not have the meaning which is ascribed to them by the ignorant. We often find people carrying out processes and following theories which emanate, true enough, from legitimate sources, but which are wrongly understood. Sometimes, far from giving advantages to the people involved, they are signs of danger. (7)

Searching for Emotional Stimulus and Excitement

- o Most people who approach systems of higher knowledge try to understand the subject from the outside, without entering into the essence of it. “The attachment to externals, esteeming the container and not the content, is a major human tendency.”

People are accustomed to associating certain kinds of social behaviour – appearance – certain traditional practices, and certain otherwise unexplained feelings, even certain places and objects, with inevitable, automatic, basic, undoubted spiritual significance. Such people are always left behind in any real effort. Therefore: ‘The Manifest is the Bridge to the Real, but not all manifestations are bridges to the Real’. (8)

- o In almost all aspects of life, including higher studies, people will seek things which attract them, rather than that which will suit them. Certain individuals are attracted to the sheer unfamiliarity or novelty-value of an esoteric teaching.
- o Systems of higher knowledge can be employed for purposes of recreational amusement or for real learning. The would-be student must distinguish between the entertainment and instructional function. “The student may become a consumer of emotional stimuli, while concurrently imagining that one is experiencing spirituality.”
- o The term ‘spiritual tourism’ has been coined to describe the superficial search for entertainment, emotional stimulation and social satisfaction rather than real spirituality.

- o In the 'enjoyment stage' of learning people are essentially entertaining themselves by consuming intellectual and emotional stimuli or engaging in lower-level amusements.

Q: Could I have an example of heedlessness, as the Sufis call it, in the form of not keeping alert to our studies?

A: Recently I had a request, from a group of people who had been studying my books for some years, for fresh material. I knew that they did not need fresh material, and that they had only taken from the existing books the things that amused or interested them, not the material that was there. I therefore paraphrased several dozen passages from these books, and put them in a slightly different form. After typing, these were sent to the group. Their reaction was almost to weep with delight at this 'new and exciting, really marvelous stuff.' They had already had several hundred times as much material of this quality; they also had this identical material in paraphrase, but this they believed to be 'new'.

This is heedlessness in the form you mention. These people do not deserve more because they are plainly incapable of dealing with what they have; they are liable – if we are not careful – to take up time which we could give to others who do bother to learn and to stay alert. (9)

- o The sensationalist gains satisfaction through seeking and obtaining emotional stimuli. This preoccupation attenuates the process of actual learning. "The would-be student must decide whether their search is or is not a manifestation of sheer curiosity, a desire for emotional stimulus or satisfaction."
- o Many individuals who are involved in the spiritual quest are really just consuming emotional experiences under the guise of exploring new alluring ideas.

People seek teachers and teaching in order to find something that they do not know already. In reality, however, teachers and teachings exist to help people to apply and practise, not to amuse or give experiences that must be new.

It is also possible that things which seem 'new' to people are the last things that they need for the purpose of improving them.

You will know the seeker of sensations because he is attracted by the new or mysterious. You will know the real student because he seeks whatever there is to be found. (10)

- o People tend to respond to things which have immediate appeal or which touch them emotionally, often disregarding more subtle impacts. "What a sorry state such people are in when some sort of dramatic event spells activity and significance, and where the absence of a crude stimulus spells discontent or means that 'nothing is happening'."
- o Individuals who approach a spiritual teaching in a highly charged, emotional state are usually unable to benefit from such a contact.

A man came to see me recently, and I could see that he was very agitated. He had read a lot of books, and had been in many groups of 'seekers', and he had made

himself desperate to get into a learning situation.

I told him that excitement of this kind, emotionality at this pitch, was a barrier to learning.

Now he had obviously been informed by others in the past that ‘agitation is next to spirituality’, and he was not going to give this up without a struggle. He said that it was anxiety and emotionalism which had brought him to me, so how could it be bad?

The very fact that he saw things like that, and could not see the flaw in his own reasoning was a sufficient symptom of his state. So I had to explain it to him. I said: ‘If you had come to this house on a donkey, which brought you here, you would not have been allowed to ride it into my study. It fulfils its function, and then other functions take over.’

Again, such was his state of excitement that, instead of this appearing, as it was, to be a wholly reasonable statement of the situation, he regarded my information as a kind of masterly inspiration, or esoteric analogy. (11)

o One of the chief barriers preventing would-be seekers from harmonizing with a legitimate source of spiritual teaching is the over-development and over-use of the imagination. Rumi: *‘Imagination blocks you like a bolt on a door. Burn that bar.’*

o Some seekers crave wonders and miracles and the acquisition of ‘mystical’ experiences. Fascination and interest in such things represents a form of emotional craving. “Such emotional reactions are part of the secondary self and do not represent perceptions of truth.”

People too often mistake one thing for another. Having heard of miracles associated with religion, they believe things are miraculous, when they are not, or try to find the miraculous, rather than the truth. They won’t listen to a source of knowledge, even, as the saying goes, when they are sitting up a tree with one. (12)

o One of the obstacles to higher human development is the desire for ‘secrets’ or ‘mystery’ on the part of the seeker. “People seeking knowledge often assume that there is some secret that can be confided to them, something that they can acquire, as one takes possession of a material object.”

People who are seen to be strongly influenced by the idea of secrecy, and stimulated by it, thus automatically reveal themselves as curiosity-mongers, and the Sufi for instance, will know how to deal with such a person. It may well be that he has ruled himself out while he remains a mere anticipator of secrets.

To clamour for ‘secrets’ or to do the equivalent (to want them unknowingly) is a characteristic of man, strongly marked in almost all undertakings and stages of maturity, by no means confined to esoteric areas. If you narrow your conception of secrecy to a crude definition of something which is being kept from you, for instance, you do no more than show that you are unlikely to be flexible and sensitive enough to understand the ‘secret’ aspects of refined and subtle things. Many ‘secrets’ are best kept by the denial of any secret, or by people appearing, as Sufis often do, to be people of simplicity and ordinariness. The advantage of this to the Sufi is that it relieves him of the need to avoid or combat secret-seekers: they regard him as superficial or ‘ordinary’. (13)

- o People who claim that they have had ‘indescribable’ feelings or experiences are unlikely to profit from serious spiritual study.

The worst are those with vague, sporadic, incomplete connections with an ‘invisible world’. In fact, such feelings are mere distortions or the stirring of a potentiality, which their own subjectivity endows with fantastic, distorted entities and meanings, and often attempts to systematize. And the worst of these seek similar equally distorted individuals or examples of literature, and ‘prove’ their experience by reference to these.

They suffer from concealed arrogance. (14)

- o People who feel something strongly may be feeling it in an erroneous and unconstructive manner. Such individuals are in reality sensationalists who easily become indoctrinated, obsessional or ‘true believers’. “People who cannot tell the difference between a real feeling and one which has been trained into them are not capable of learning on their own.”

Inevitable pitfalls in human learning are two: ‘conversion syndrome’ when people believe anything said by an individual or institution; and obsessional opposition, when they believe nothing. These are the two factors, though they may be combined in one person in varying proportions. The task of the real higher teaching is to contact people and inform them quite aside from the question of faith or unfaith. Both the latter factors are aspects of brain-engineering, and have no place in real teaching. (15)

- o Individuals who are powerfully attracted to a teaching and who are single-minded in their pursuit of higher knowledge may actually harm their development due to wrong motivations and the operation of conditioning factors.
- o Following a spiritual teacher through curiosity or hero worship can lead to the ‘cult of the personality’ whereby the subjective impact of the person obscures the meaning and reality which the teacher truly represents. Students who are fascinated and impressed by the personality of a teacher are poor candidates for the assimilation of higher knowledge until they learn to handle the impact and make use of it.
- o People who respond to authority-figures or only to the famous and respected are unable to make contact with many genuine wise people. “Spiritual teachers who lead ordinary lives, or who lack the trappings, are invisible to the anxious.”

Journeys to the East

- o The desire to travel and undertake journeys to foreign lands as part of one’s ‘spiritual search’ is a common, if unpromising, human characteristic.

A mere journey to the East generally has the effect of the jingle: ‘Two men

looked out from prison bars/ One saw mud, the other stars.’ What is the wayfarer like, quite apart from the road or the destination?

Take heart from the fact that this tendency to wander about looking for knowledge, and to set off for distant destinations (supposedly for knowledge but in reality just to get moving) is a very human tendency.

So we have to assess who it is that is proposing to go to ‘The East’, when this person wants to go, with whom – if anyone – and to where.

More people go to the East and find nothing than ever realize any heart’s desire, because they do not know how to structure their enterprise. (16)

- o Western seekers who journey to the East in search of knowledge and wisdom are often unaware that they are merely looking for sensation, mystery or emotional stimulation. “Too many Westerners become *orientalized*. This is sometimes because they seek spirituality in the East and think that therefore *everything* in the East is for them or can teach them something.”
- o The longing to embark on personal journeys to the East to search for higher knowledge is often rooted in selfishness and self-preoccupation. “Some seekers spend large amounts of money to travel, collecting it sometimes from others, and think only of themselves, even if they do not realize it.”

Q: Is this why you seem to discourage people from coming long distances to see you, while they continue to arrive from the ends of the earth from Japan, Argentina, India, Canada, Samoa . . . ?

A: I do not discourage all such people. But there is a pattern, and I am glad to be able to share it with you, since it is one which lies at the very root of our studies. When I was a young disciple, I had exactly the same question, and was in just the same sort of position as you. My teacher used to get letters and visits from people from all over the world. I asked him why he discouraged people who made (or were prepared to make) long and sometimes difficult journeys. What he told me I have found to be true, and even, if that is possible, doubly true. It is as this:

ATTITUDES OF DISCIPLES

People tend to think first and mostly of themselves. This can mean that when they hear of our work, they passionately desire to take part in it, to learn more, to benefit themselves personally. When they do this it always means that they are feeding their own selfishness, and have become fixated on personal advantage. (17)

- o Seeking spiritual teachings in the East is based on a number of unexamined assumptions concerning the way such teachings are projected and established in the world.

The Western would-be disciple, having read various books, reasons – fallaciously – somewhat in this manner:

‘This teaching originates in the East. In the East there are people who know about it. Therefore I shall go to the East and find a master who will be able to teach me more about it.’

This is fallacious because it would be true only if the Eastern mystical masters were so inefficient that, wanting to project their teachings in the West, they were incapable of setting up Western centers, specially adjusted to Western ways, for the establishment and progress of their work. (18)

- o Unthinking journeys to the East can be viewed as a compulsion to do things for which one is not fitted, based on the assumption that one's choice of action is necessary and appropriate.

Assume that you are a missionary, trained to speak a foreign tongue in Rome, and sent out to bring Catholicism to the people of some remote African territory. You start to talk to the people, as soon as you arrive. They say to you: 'This sounds interesting. Where do you come from? You answer: 'I come from Rome, the seat of our teaching and study.'

'Very well,' say the locals, 'we will journey to Rome, to the source and fountain-head of your teaching.'

You tell them: 'First, you speak no Latin, no Italian, none of the languages of the countries through which you would have to journey. Furthermore, you have not the wherewithal to make the trip. Your customs and way of thinking at the moment are unacceptable to the people of Rome, where none will understand you. It is for this reason that I have spent many years in studying your language and your ways, having been especially equipped for the task which brings me here. Can you not see that I am an instrument, fashioned for the purpose of making possible your learning which would be impossible otherwise?'

In a similar way you must realise your own capacity. Such journeys to the East or West, are for the man who is ready for such a journey. If you do not even know that you are in the situation of the remote tribesman, you are less than likely to be ready for a trip to a place and among people who are, in fact, unable to communicate with you except through the instruments of their own fashioning. (19)

- o Those who are involved in a spiritual quest often make the incorrect assumption that they can set out on journeys entirely on their own terms and at their own convenience. They fail to make the distinction between random and real, purposeful seeking.

A certain man, passing through London on his way to the East, contacts me and asks to be put in touch with what he calls teachers in the East. He has a travel plan, and wants to combine it with his search, as he calls it.

You might think that this is all very convenient. Why should he not visit people of knowledge or sanctity, and profit thereby?

Yet this kind of thinking is based upon one of the most disastrous of all assumptions, and is motivated by the Commanding Self. The assumption is that the man can always make his own choices: that he can drop in on a mystic and get something out of the contact, just as if he was smelling a rose or buying a pound of butter, or looking at a tourist sight – 'on a higher level, of course'.

The Commanding Self tells the man that he can benefit, at any time, in any place, from a contact with something higher. The assumption, made from ignorance of simple facts, tells this man (a student of many years' standing) that he is in a state suitable to picking up advantages, just like someone without eyes who tells you that he wants to see something.

The amusing dichotomy here between what is real and what the man thinks is

real is this. He believes that, by going somewhere and seeking out someone who will tell him something or instruct him in some way, he is acting purposefully. In fact, he is acting randomly, because there is no chance that he will be able to find the right man at the right time in the right place to answer to his special needs. Remember that we are all individuals, and that our development can take place only under conditions which make it possible. That is the difference between a quest carried out randomly and one which is really efficient. (20)

Self-Deception and Self-Preoccupation

'Vanity stands in the way of intelligence.'
Saying

- o One of the great dangers of an undirected spiritual search is to focus energy and attention on the personal self, essentially a form of self-absorption and self-preoccupation. "This is the stage which very few ordinary spiritually-minded people ever leave: the stage where it is their subjective self, their appetite for excitement and a sense of importance or of being connected with something of great value, not their spiritual capacities, which are engaged."

Self-indulgence is often confused with following an esoteric discipline, as when a person adopts a particular technique, such as self-observation, but uses it in a fragmentary, partial manner. What this approach does not credit is that if one is concentrating merely on oneself, it matters little whether one finds the self fascinating, disgusting, or even "objective." The point is that *all attention is directed at the self*, and nothing is left for a more comprehensive awareness. This kind of thinking stems from a simple confusion: self-indulgence is not mysticism. It is as mistaken as if a cell in the body decided that, by simple, continuous observation of its vicissitudes, it could somehow become a whole person. In any real attempt at conscious development, attention needs to be directed *away* from the self, from the psychotherapeutic "growth" or emotional levels, and away from piecemeal mystical techniques as well, in order that a person may encounter aspects of his surroundings *other* than the ordinary self. In an undegenerated esoteric tradition, the ordinary self is not to be continuously massaged, pandered to, affirmed, or even "observed," but merely set aside as an unreliable judge of events outside its province. (21)

- o In far too many instances individuals begin a spiritual quest by only thinking of themselves and ignoring the effect of such an enterprise on others.

Q: I am resolved to enter upon the enterprise of seeking knowledge, and I am determined that I shall succeed. Whatever sacrifices and problems this may involve, I shall read all the books, carry out all the exercises, travel anywhere necessary, until I reach my goal. Is there anything wrong about this?

A: There is a classical Sufi story about a King who was setting out to war. He was accompanied by everything necessary, from gold to arms, from fierce warriors to military bands. No detail of his enterprise had been forgotten. On

the way he met a Dervish, a poor and weak wanderer who was yet a wise man, reputed to know the language of birds.

The Dervish told the King:

‘I know the language of birds, and what they are saying about your Majesty.’

The King said:

‘Are they pleased that I am set on this path, and that I am determined to succeed?’

‘They are delighted, your Majesty,’ said the Dervish, ‘for they say: “This King will ruin so many cities that we shall have abundant nesting-places for the rest of time among the fallen buildings.”’

This is the answer to your question: you may arrive at a goal by the methods which you mention. The question of the effect which this will have on others, and what your own fate will be, are not reckoned into the scheme. (22)

o A balance must be achieved between desiring things for oneself and wanting others to benefit as well. Many would-be students are only concerned with their own development, which is essentially an expression of vanity and self-absorption. A saying by the Sufi Jami illustrates this problem: ‘Seekers there are plenty: but they are almost all seekers of personal advantage. I can find so very few Seekers after Truth.’

o Although many seekers appear sincere in their search for spiritual truth, in reality they are motivated by egoism and desire for personal satisfaction. In many cases the pursuit of spiritual knowledge only serves to support vanity, pride and a sense of personal significance. “If your desire for ‘good’ is based on greed, it is not good, but greed.”

When someone’s self-esteem is linked to his ‘spiritual search’, he can achieve very little until he has seen that this is a wrong connection. Generally, of course, people are unaware that they *pride* themselves on being serious ‘travellers on the Way’ or whatever they call it. They more often imagine that they are humble: but this humility is quite often easily exposed as an unwitting cloak for a sense of personal importance. (23)

o Seekers often have an inflated attitude about their own level of knowledge and degree of perceptiveness concerning spiritual matters. There is a tendency for learners to over-value their role, knowledge and potentiality.

Metaphysically minded people, and especially those who feel that they are comfortable in the domain of mysticism or “inner perception,” have no greater start on the generality of humanity. Their subjectivity, especially where it is linked with a strong sense of personal uniqueness “caught” from other people, can in fact be a serious disability. (24)

o Those who are involved in a personal spiritual search often want reassurance that their time has been fruitfully spent and their efforts have led to real growth and development.

Q: Is it not better to have spent some time, even years, trying to find some sort of truth, than not to have tried at all?

Surely we cannot say that one has not gained something through having spent time with books or people connected with an esoteric or higher search?

A: If it has been a wrong search, there is probably no advantage, and certainly a great deal of disadvantage. This is a question which is asked again and again by people who want reassurance.

If they are prepared to face it, here is the rest of the answer: They have spent years with books or people – therefore something must have been attained. The reasoning, from the point of experience from which we speak, is false.

The answers to this question, from the people themselves, generally consists of assertions that they feel better, that they feel happier, or that they have been able to ‘help others’. There are a lot of other answers too.

The situation really is that, unless they know what they have gained, how much of it, and where they are going, the ‘gain’ if any, is at best latent. It cannot be regarded as useful at the time. It has no worth at all until activated by harmonization with a significant activity in the real tradition.

I meet many people who have worked hard in this field, have tried so hard that they did not know when they had reached the end of their constructive development. They needed certain other developments, and consequently have deteriorated through repetitious activity until they are, in fact, no use at all, though they may feel that they are, and may contrive to transmit this sensation to others. (25)

- o The confusion and doubt that often beset those engaged in a spiritual search are largely self-created and self-maintained. “The difficulties are within people, for they imagine things which are really irrelevant to be important in this search: ‘You yourself are your own barrier – rise from within it.’

Q: What can I do about my confusion and worthlessness?

A: Plenty of people create and maintain their own confusion, even while imagining that they are trying to escape it.

The answer, therefore, to ‘what can I do about my confusion?’ is, ‘Find out what its cause is, and why it is there. Then decide if you want to do anything about it.’

Confusion comes of not paying attention to what should be attended to first. The problem of the confused, therefore, is that they should become aware of this, first using their wits to observe themselves, and think less about confusion. Remember the proverb: ‘A sign is enough for the alert, but a thousand counsels are not enough for the negligent.’ (26)

- o It is only by observation and examination that the hindering effects of vanity and self-absorption can be identified and overcome. Regarding self-deception: “The only corrective is to be prepared to face one’s own self-deception, even if it has existed for thirty years under the name of ‘interest in higher knowledge’.”
- o One of the consequences of self-deception in the metaphysical domain is that people may start to set up study groups, advise other people, or even try to teach others without any corresponding spiritual understanding and maturity.

Social Integration and Therapy

- o Many seekers are really trying to find relief from social, psychological and other pressures, not spiritual illumination and understanding. The desire for social activity, personal prominence and recognition by others is often mistaken for meaningful spiritual development.
- o The confusion between social adjustment and spiritual development is widespread among people who approach higher esoteric teachings.

The social problem being interposed between the student and the Teaching means inevitably that, in the absence of efficient information about the matter, the student will continue to study and attempt to employ higher developmental materials as a means to further his social adjustment.

Such usage is a travesty of what can be done, and causes the instructors of the teaching to become reduced to social integration engineers: a task which can equally well be performed by people with conventional knowledge in current cultures.

Such importance, however, does the social adjustment factor assume in the brain of the student, and so confused with 'higher' things is this factor in his thinking, that it is a very real problem and a test for him to allow himself to see that this situation exists.

Self-deception will cause him to oppose, deny or by-pass such a realization. But it is a central fact of the Teaching that the Teaching itself is lost when it becomes a mere means of helping social adjustment. This is doubly true where there are adequate methods and facilities for social adjustment available already in the wider community, the 'host culture.' (27)

- o In many instances the would-be student's spiritual pursuit is really a disguised form of a search for social integration and acceptance.

It is hurtful to have to deal with people whom you would like to teach when -- pretending to themselves that they seek knowledge -- they only want a social community, friendship, 'togetherness', attention and the like.

All these things are delightful: and all the more delightful when consciously indulged in, rather than found by means of deception. Deception in this case is pretending to oneself that one is studying when one is seeking stimuli.

Such people may have the capacity to learn. But they overlay it with shallow aims. They may have been trained to seek smaller satisfactions and to give them grand names.

The condition can be so well established that people are to all intents and purposes unconscious of its presence. (28)

- o Approaches to spiritual teachers and teachings often begin with a desire for attention. "The desire for attention, to receive someone's attention, or to call attention to oneself, is often marked."

You may have something to teach, and yet be unable to teach it because the people who 'want to learn it' effectively prevent themselves from learning; at the same time protesting that they 'want to learn', or 'cannot understand.' Such people

reason unconsciously, that if they protest you will keep their attention upon them. In this way they gain your attention (or hope to do so). In any other way, they might lose it. (29)

- o The primary motivation of many people who approach spiritual teachings is psychotherapy and the reduction or resolution of personal problems. It is important to distinguish the difference between self-realization and therapy. “The distinction, especially in the West, has become so narrow in people’s minds that mystics are constantly asked what are in fact medical questions.”
- o Perceptions of a higher order can be blocked from awareness by coarser ambitions and pre-occupations of a socio-psychological order. “Higher consciousness may very well be the last thing that people need in their present adequate integration into their society, if they lack the flexibility to be *‘In the world, not of it.’*”
- o Necessary and essential needs, such as social harmony, mental stabilization and a sense of belonging, must be met before any productive search for higher knowledge and wisdom even begins.

Those who have a need for social or psychological stability will demand this first, and will always employ the observed externals and the associations of a real teaching on this lower level. It is therefore of great importance that people who feel that they want to align to something higher should first stabilize themselves in the social context, so that they will not unconsciously be seeking to transform something higher into something lower. Their social capacities, needs and integration have to be established first. (30)

- o It is very important that individuals engaged on a spiritual path first make sure that their social and psychological needs are satisfied in the normal human community to which they belong.

You must follow your personality interests somewhere else. In an advanced society there are more institutions catering for such outlets than anyone could possibly need. Make sure that your professional, commercial, social, psychological and family needs are fulfilled in the society to which you belong. The rest of you is the part which can be communicated with by means of the specialized techniques available to those who have a comprehensive and legitimate traditional learning: and who have the means of safeguarding it.

In ordinary life, if you think that your family is largely a commercial proposition, people will point out that you are misguided. If you thought that your profession was mainly for social purposes, people would soon put you right. It is time that you were correctly informed in this field as well. You must know, or find out, the difference between meeting to learn and experience something, and meeting in order to be emotionally stimulated or intellectually tested or socially reassured.

There is no harm at all in a social ingredient in a human relationship: far from it. But when this gets out of balance, and a human contact becomes an excuse for a social contact, you are not going to learn, no matter what materials you are working with. (31)

- o The primary aim of a spiritual teaching is self-realization and not merely the removal of psychological problems, although this may occur as a secondary by-product of the teaching.

People seek from spiritual sources solutions to problems which are themselves generally only symptoms. The real spiritual school deals with the cause.

When the spiritual experiences have been achieved, they remove the problems which trouble people. It is not the other way around.

This is a good analogy: -

A shopkeeper had a cask of oil, which he sealed with his ring-impression after filling it full. His assistants, however, found that they could steal oil by drilling a hole near the bottom of the barrel and plugging it until they wanted to draw off the oil from there.

When the shopkeeper opened his cask and found that, although the top was secure, the level had gone down, he was baffled. He asked a wiser man, who was a customer at his shop, what this might mean.

The wise man said: 'Some has been drawn off from the bottom: why don't you look there for the source of your problem?'

'Fool!' shouted the shopkeeper: 'I am talking about the oil that is missing from the *top!*' (32)

Impatience and the Desire for Progress

'Do not try to run before you can walk.'

Saying

- o Impatience, anxiety and a sense of urgency actually prevent progress and development in the spiritual area. These factors cause would-be students to overlook many essential qualities of a learning situation. "Learning requires attention to other things than 'how long things will take'."
- o Many students of higher knowledge are their own worst enemies because they are too anxious to see immediate results and obvious signs of change. "Impatience prevents learning. At its worst, it causes a preoccupation with the thought 'Why am I not making any progress?', which effectively blocks that progress."
- o The desire for 'instant illumination' and the attraction to short-cuts or crash programs of study are traps which many Western seekers find themselves in. Teachings which are slower-paced or based on 'drop-by-drop' activity are perceived as unrewarding or uninteresting.
- o People are impatient to learn and expect esoteric knowledge to be handed to them without any suitable preparation or effort on their part. In far too many instances would-be students fail to undertake necessary preparatory work such as familiarization with written materials.
- o Impatience is often based upon unexamined assumptions, through selective reading and study, about how the learning process should proceed.

Anxiety or impatience are similar to feelings experienced in any situation where people have themselves made random assumptions about how much time they need to do something; or how little time they may have left in which to achieve something. It is they, in such a case, and not the school or other source of expertise, which is saying what the curriculum should be. Does such a back-to-front situation not surprise you, when you look at it straight?

The reading of selected passages from books, those which for example stress questions of haste and urgency, originally addressed to people in specific places, at special times, for appropriate purposes – this is no way to learn about one's own situation. Yet the fault frequently lies in the learner who is not seldom inefficient, greedy or inadequately prepared. He is not listening to the teacher, or not looking at the whole of the picture. If he was, he would find that patience is spoken of as tellingly as urgency. (33)

- o When people are in a hurry to learn they fail to properly absorb and digest spiritual teachings and procedures. “In the ‘employment stage’ of learning people try to use materials prematurely (before they have been sufficiently prepared to attain any real knowledge). This is rooted in impatience and selfishness.”

When people try to ‘steal’ something, to use it too soon, it is because they have a tendency to want to do so before they have taken it in. This means that they do not in fact have what they think they have, because their desire for acquisition and transmission are stronger than their desire to learn. Since we are living in the ‘abode of decay’, this kind of procedure holds good for many other human activities, and you will find it in non-spiritual areas, generally to their detriment. It can be useful to use such areas when one can find them for observation and self-instruction. (34)

- o The desire of would-be students to progress on their own terms along the path of spiritual development is rooted in disguised greed and lack of humility.
- o The desire for tangible signs of progress along the spiritual journey is pervasive among seekers of all types. This is especially marked in our contemporary achievement-oriented world where success and accomplishment are greatly esteemed and valued.

There are many people who are excessively interested in whether they are “progressing” or “improving” in any endeavor. This does set the stage, even in formal metaphysical writing, for the conception of Levels of Development. These are generally studied well by the person looking for the fast answer, or looking to become “enlightened” and to have others know and judge him or her as such. The difficulty is that obsessional thought tends to capture anything of value in *any* system. Spiritual progress can then become a substitute for progress in one's job or family life. (35)

- o Students involved in spiritual groups often look for clear, obvious signs of progress and development while ignoring more subtle processes that actually embody the ‘inner work’.

Q: Why does a study group go on, sometimes for years, reading books, meeting and apparently not getting anything done, without any measurement of its progress, and without a sense of how things are going?

A: The main characteristic displayed by the questioner is that of a person who wants something ('progress', or a sense of how things are going?) without carrying on an active observation and digesting of experience happening in and to the group. In traditional terminology familiar to people of all cultures (used in this instance not as a reproach but as a technique) we have here too much greed ahead of capacity, too much dissatisfaction due to greed and false premises, too much laziness which gives rise to a person being a potential victim of an exploiter who might appear and promise automatic progress without effort or right alignment. (36)

- o Many students of higher studies are incapable of perceiving subtle impacts and developments in their spiritual life and are looking instead for obvious indications of change or quantifiable signs of progress.

Anyone who really thinks that 'nothing is happening' has, in fact if not in appearance, already left our studies, because such an idea in the mind of a pupil means that he has taken too long to learn a basic lesson. He can start to study again, but he must know that he had stopped learning.

He might know that a child or a peasant being told that he is revolving with the earth would deny it, saying 'nothing is happening'.

To such a person, something happening is not really something happening. It is something happening which he can himself feel and decide to be such. It may be utterly unimportant, it may actually be dangerous to him: but if he can feel that it is happening, he is happy or interested.

To feel something of real value taking place, you have to be farther advanced than a savage who looks for crude symptoms (which only mean crude happenings). (37)

- o There are a number of parallels between the requirements of any normal teaching situation and those of an authentic spiritual tradition. These requirements are often ignored by those engaged in a spiritual quest.

A physics teacher could not make any real progress with a class of idiots, or people who primarily wanted power or fame or gain through physics. These factors would be getting in the way of the teaching. A class of brilliant students, faced with a man who knew no physics, or who only had a smattering, would make little progress. A good teacher, with a suitable student body, could do little unless the instruments and equipment, the building and so on, were available as and when needed.

If anything is strictly demanded by the teachers of the perpetual Higher Teaching, it is these requirements.

Yet this principle, so well established in conventional studies of all kinds, is largely passed over and has fallen into disuse, among esotericists. Why? Because they have a primitive and unenlightened attitude towards teaching. Like an oaf who has just heard of physics or only seen some of its manifestations, the would-be student wants it all *now*. He does not care about the necessary presence of other students. He wants to skip the curriculum and he sees no connection between the

building and the subject of physics. So he does not want a laboratory. (38)

- o The complexity of genuine esoteric systems precludes the easy answers and rapid progress so prized by many seekers of higher knowledge. “The overall picture, understood at a certain stage, enables one to perceive what place each experience takes in the process, but it is not easy to describe it in advance.”

Human greed and impatience, which has largely been brought under control in social areas where it has been extensively made unprofitable, still operates full blast in esotericist fields. As a consequence, the very thing desired by the would-be illuminate is out of his grasp and will remain so until he learns what steps he must take first.

The very first step is to realize that there is no genuine esoteric study in which he will get simple answers to simple questions, and where he will be able easily to attain what he wants. He will have to expose himself to what appears to be the most diverse and improbable materials and experiences before he has the basic preparation upon which alone he can build. If he frequents circles which purport to give him something higher through a logical system, he will have fallen into the hands of scoundrels or superficialists. His greed will disable him. (39)

- o In authentic mystical traditions the student’s progress and development occurs in measured stages, each step preparing for the next.

The fact that one may be learning bit by bit, storing up little pieces of information and experience which are, almost insensibly, to come together at some later date, naturally does not recommend itself to people who may be offered elsewhere something which, it is claimed, will give them instant insights. Hence the grasping for catch-all categories of teaching, which always claim to be comprehensive. Sufi study, therefore, cannot hope to compete with instant-illumination-offering systems, just as the much-vaunted nostrum called snake-oil will claim much more attention from some people than something less dramatic. (40)

- o Providing a time-frame for spiritual development actually works against the attainment of the goal since the attitude of the aspirant is changed by the provision of time-bound information.

People ask: ‘Why not tell me at once whether I am acceptable for teaching or not? Or, ‘How long will I have to study?’

The answer is extraordinarily simple. Take this parallel. If, as an employer, you say to a new recruit: ‘You are going to become the head of this department eventually,’ you will alter the condition of his mind. He might well have become head of the department in due time, starting from the state in which you found him. But once you have told him, his attitude may become such as to prevent him from achieving this aim.

As soon as anyone is told anything, he is not the same as he was before he was told it. In order to help the man become head of the department, you may have to tell him something completely different.

That is why we say: ‘I cannot tell you what you want to know – only what you *need* to know.’ (41)

- o A teaching story illustrates through analogy the importance of ‘right time, place and people’ in the pursuit of higher knowledge.

People often imagine that if they do not get what they have wanted exactly when they want it, they have wasted their time, or that someone else is to blame. They may think, too, that they are to blame when it is all a matter of the right time, right place, right people.

You can keep this in your mind by an analogy, which is not supposed to be regarded as a sacred recital, but is scripted to show you the relative positions of timing and also of how people leave out of calculations things which alter circumstances. This is the story:

A Wager

A man once bought a parrot. When he got it home, he told it: “I am going to teach you to talk”. “Don’t bother,” answered the bird, “I can talk already!” He was so amazed that he took it to a teahouse. “Look, I’ve got a fantastic talking parrot here!” But the parrot wouldn’t talk, even though the man kept insisting that it could. People bet him ten to one that it could not, and he lost the bet. Nothing would induce it to speak.

On the way home, followed by the jeers of his friends, the man cuffed the parrot and said: “You fool – look at the amount of money you lost me!”

“It is you who are the fool,” said the parrot. “Take me back to that teahouse tomorrow and you’ll get hundred to one and win!” (42)

Role of Conditioning and Training of Beliefs

- o Most people have been trained to approach a subject, including spirituality, in a certain manner. Such individuals have been described as “servants of a mental model, seeking not knowledge but the fulfillment of expectations.”
- o Conditioned beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are inevitably part of the personal background of seekers and students of higher knowledge. “The majority of people who seek spiritual and ‘mystical’ knowledge are unable to profit from it only because their formation, their early training is unsuitable.”

In order to approach the Sufi Way, the Seeker must realize that he is, largely, a bundle of what are nowadays called conditionings – fixed ideas and prejudices, automatic responses sometimes which have occurred through the training of others. Man is not as free as he thinks he is. The first step is for the individual to get away from thinking that he understands, and really understand. (43)

- o The conditioning imposed by a culture strongly influences the way in which seekers approach a source of higher knowledge and wisdom. “The people of the West in general, sharing for the most part a common culture, will tend to approach and to view something outside of their format – as well as within it – in a manner conditioned by their own environment.”

The typical Western 'seeker' is very much conditioned to names, symbols and labels. He will be impressed if something which he has thought of or felt seems to chime with something which he comes across in the East or in Eastern writings, such is the influence of associations upon him. This 'associative tendency' marks him out from the Easterner, who will want to know why something strikes him so powerfully, not merely be influenced by it. The Western seeker, again, holds in his mind a wide range of assumptions and imaginings about what is spiritual and what is not.

People from the West embarking on a spiritual search have a determination to retain whatever principles, practices and opinions they have acquired through their entire search. They do not, in sum, approach a teaching as a coherent whole with something to give, but rather in fact as something which should be at least partially amalgamated with their pre-existent beliefs. They demand teachings which not only accord with a pre-set pattern, but which also embody random parts of other teachings which happen to have caught the fancy of the 'seeker.' (44)

- o The psychological biases and patterns of thought and behaviour of the spiritual seeker are an impediment to higher development and understanding. One of the roles of a teacher is to remove these blocks. "The fixed but unperceived biases of the student need someone outside of the student to supply the stimuli which will enable him (or her) to escape from the trap of customary thinking-patterns."
- o Some of the typical conditioned 'traps of belief' that beset spiritual seekers when approaching an inner developmental teaching have been identified.

People think they are being spiritual, when their thought is so polluted by subjective psychological motives that they have lost all sense of what is really spiritual.

There are three major 'prisons' of thought which manipulate people, instead of their being on top of them: -

- * Demanding sequentialism in everything; there has to be timing and stimuli within periods of time stipulated by the 'prisoner';
- * Expecting reward and punishment connected with spiritual ideas, irrespective of whether they are really involved;
- * Thinking in terms of contract: 'give me this and I'll give you that'.

If you escape these, then there follows, closely behind, the curse of needing either the familiar or the unfamiliar. People seek the familiar for comfort or verification; the unfamiliar for emotional stimulus or excitement . . . (45)

- o Seekers often approach spiritual teachings with a set agenda based on their previous conditioning and experiences.

Because the student is likely to be imprisoned by attitudes which have trained him, he will tend to approach the teacher, and the teaching, in all kinds of ineffective and minor ways. He will ask for 'peace of mind', progress in his worldly life, money, knowledge, illumination, assurances – all things which may be important in one way or another, but which are not necessarily relevant to his situation. In

other words, he asks to be taught, or to be given, knowledge and things which he happens to be wanting for the sole reason that he has decided that these are necessary or urgent. (46)

- o Spiritual seekers have been conditioned to the belief that they can instantly recognize a real teaching or teacher. “The human being lives in a world where he does not realize that many of his evaluation systems (in ‘the work’ as well) are frequently programmed ones; the result of indoctrination, deliberate and (more often) unwitting.”

The problem is not for the legitimate teaching to project itself in a familiar manner. This is always active. It is for those who imagine that they could recognize a school, if it looked or sounded like what they demand, to re-educate themselves, to perceive the real thing and appreciate it. It is, in short, they who need reorientation. It is not part of a mystical school’s work to re-programme those who are conditioned to look for the wrong thing, or the right thing in the wrong way. After all, the would-be student must do something for himself. This something is to become truly aware of what really *is* there. What holds him back? Vanity and the belief that he can judge the school by his present criteria. These characteristics disable him from being a candidate for the school. (47)

- o A student’s expectations and preconceptions about the spiritual path colour their reactions to the teachings that they receive.

Many of the reasons for people starting on spiritual or advanced studies and then abandoning them are to be found in the single factor of the disparity between their expectations (based usually on conditioning or greed) and reality. They wanted certain experiences but were offered different ones.

It is, of course, difficult to provide people with any version of a truth which they cannot yet perceive, in order to convince them that it is worth seeking: hence the vacuum into which all kinds of expectations rush. (48)

- o Higher spiritual teachings have to overcome the existing attitudes and beliefs of potential students regarding the nature of metaphysical studies before any real progress can be made.

The acceptance, rejection, uncertainty on the part of individuals and/or groups towards the projection of the Teaching all stem from attitudes already shaped by the native community of the individual or group.

Hence, for example:

- * If an individual or group is accustomed to deriving its social solace and advantages from an authoritarian system, such an individual or group will seek similar stimuli from the ‘new’ approach.
- * If the individual has been trained, through his social environment, to regard things which he does not understand as sinister, he will bring this attitude to bear upon anything which he does not understand, and this will include, not be confined to, any manifestation of the Teaching.
- * Only hopelessly ignorant individuals and institutions adopt the view that ‘conditioning’ people (giving them a new social outlook) is a part of teaching. It is a part of processing.

* Only social groupings masquerading as 'higher' ones (including those belonging to religions) imagine that the induction of an emotional breakdown followed by acceptance of certain beliefs is 'conversion'. It is reprogramming.

Therefore any approach to individuals and/or groups, whatever their complexion, must take into account these social factors. It must, in addition, be able to present itself in such a manner as to communicate the fact that it is not concerned with the shallower factors which are truly social. It must illustrate, as clearly and as often as necessary, that what most people take to be 'spiritual' or 'higher' experiences are induced by methodologies which interfere with the customary social, chemical or electric milieu of the individual. (49)

- o One of the central factors interfering with real learning is the conditioned desire for pleasure and entertainment rather than knowledge or truly developmental experiences.

The individual who wants to solve the problems of humankind today comes to the teacher with an often enormous ragbag of ideas, impressions and theories, only some of which will be of use in this particular specialization.

The test which the learner has to pass, first of all, is to show that he or she can study what is important and relevant. The pupil who is his or her own enemy is the one who wants to retain ideas, experiences, theories because they are fulfilling a pleasure-inducing function. So, first of all, what has to be determined is whether the student wants to learn or really (often without knowing it) wants to 'be entertained.' (50)

- o People have been trained to desire certain experiences in their inner life and as a result they confuse their subjective 'wants' with their real 'needs'.
- o One of the consequences of trained attitudes and beliefs is mistaking relatively shallow experiences for transcendent ones, or attaching significance to events when there is none.
- o The right alignment of student, teacher and teaching is essential for any meaningful spiritual progress. Students tend to ignore these important factors and search for truth in a random, haphazard fashion.

In our teaching, we must group correctly these elements: the pupils, the teacher and the circumstances of study. Only at the right time and place, with the teacher suitable to these, and with the right body of students, can our studies be said to be capable of coherent development.

Just observe what happens when people try to carry on learning or teaching without the correct grouping of the three essentials:

Would-be students always try to operate their studies with one, or at the most two, of the three factors. Teachers try to teach those who are unsuitable, because of the difficulties of finding enough people to form a class. Students who have no teacher try to teach themselves. Transpose this into a group of people trying to learn physics, and you will see some of their problems. Others group themselves around the literature and methodology of older schools, trying to make the scrap material of someone else's physics laboratory work. They formalize rituals, become obsessed

by principles and slogans, assign disproportionate importance to the elements which are only tools, but which they regard as a more significant heritage.

Anyone can think of several schools, cults, religions, systems of psychology or philosophy which fall into the above classifications.

We must categorically affirm that it is impossible to increase human knowledge in the higher field by these methods. The statistical probability of useful gains within a reasonable time is so remote as to be excluded from one's calculation.

Why, then, do people persist in raking over the embers and looking for truth when they have so little chance of finding it? Simply because they are using their conditioning propensity, not their capacity for higher perception, to try to follow the path. There is intellectual stimulus and emotional attraction in the mere effort to plumb the unknown. When the ordinary human mind encounters evidence of a higher state of being, or even when it conceives the possibility of them, it will invariably conclude that there is some possibility of progress for that mind without the application of the factors of teaching-teacher-students-time-and-place which are essentials.

Man has few alternatives in his search for truth. He may rely upon his unaided intellect, and gamble that he is capable of perceiving truth or even the way to truth. This is a poor, but an attractive, gamble. Or he can gamble upon the claims of an individual or institution which claims to have such a way. This gamble, too, is a poor one. Aside from a very few, men in general lack a sufficiently developed perception to tell them:

1. Not to trust their own unaided mentation;
2. Whom or what to trust.

There are, in consequence, two main schools of thought in this matter. Some say 'Follow your own promptings'; the other says: 'Trust this or that institution'. Each is really useless to the ordinary man. Each will help him to use up his time. (51)

Assumptions and Preconceptions

*'The door of illumination is open to those
for whom other doors are closed.'*

Saadi

- o Most people have a large number of misconceptions concerning the nature of spiritual paths. Seekers tend to assess things in accordance with preconceived ideas or else choose one single method of approaching higher knowledge.
- o When people think in limiting, restrictive terms they erect barriers that prevent learning and higher perception. Factors such as expectations, preconceptions, incorrect suppositions and premature assumptions block learning and inner development.

Assumptions can stand between the student and what he might learn, if these preconceptions are not correct or if they are not functional.

The assumptions that spiritual paths should take this or that form, should be followed by this or that type of person, should belong to certain kinds of recog-

nizable institution, etc., these ideas not only block learning – they often transform it into a search for the expected diversion, and therefore, in reality if not in appearance, towards becoming a part of the entertainment industry. (52)

- o Research suggests that learners bring a number of unexamined assumptions to bear on their search for higher knowledge and that these assumptions can actually be harmful to the learning process. “The Western would-be disciple has to learn that he cannot bring his assumptions about his own capacity to learn into a field where he does not in fact know what it is that he is trying to learn.”
- o Many seekers can only recognize a metaphysical teaching if it is put in words which they have met before, or if it has the appearance which they expect.
- o Expectations about the nature of learning in the spiritual field are actually counter-productive. “Many people imagine that any higher human development must follow a pattern whose form (or at least whose beginning) is instantly perceptible to them as such.”
- o The expectations that students have about a spiritual teaching will modify their evaluation of its perceived effectiveness. “One may not appreciate the worth of teachings or ‘gifts’ unless one is shown what they are or how to use them.”

Q: Since I began to study Sufism, there have been many difficulties in my life; or it may be that I notice things more than I did. I often feel that the disadvantages are greater than the benefits.

A: This is a typical question, and one of the interesting things about it is that an equal number of people say the very reverse. Both comments, of course, emanate from the shallower part of the mind, and have to do with expectation.

This part of one’s mind is very well represented by various animals in fables and other literature. The situation of this questioner can be summed up in the saying:

‘A donkey drank from a pool and then complained that his chin became wet.’ (53)

- o Potential students of higher knowledge and learning carry all sorts of assumptions derived from other simpler fields of endeavor. Until they recognize that these assumptions are not applicable to the spiritual path they cannot make progress.
- o Assumptions and imaginings about the nature of esoteric schools produce two very distinct approaches among would-be learners: following a too-restricted path (i.e. believing that one set of ideas or exercise will lead to higher knowledge) or else constantly shifting ground and attention.
- o People arbitrarily select parallels and assumptions from other fields of thought and try to apply them to mysticism.
- o Students automatically assume that they want to learn and know how to learn. In fact they may lack this ability and mistake other forms of human activity for real learning.

The first thing to learn is not to assume that one wants to learn, when it is possible that one only wants preconceptions reinforced. The next thing to do is to register that higher study is less the provision of activities than it is the effective increasing of the ability to learn: which may have to be done by any means necessary.

Modern people are in the same relationship to spirituality that backward people are to technology. That is to say, they know so little about it that they are unable to perceive their own ignorance.

Such people may know that they want to learn. They do not know how; they should understand that if someone else knows the 'how', this is what has to be followed. Only too often, the desire to know, which is perfectly laudable, is overtaken through haste by the assumption that one should learn in a manner which the *learner* wants or approves." (54)

- o Many spiritual aspirants are looking for a system which fits in with their preconceptions in order to achieve some sort of personal equilibrium or psychological balance.
- o When people have an over-riding interest or preoccupation with some matter it is important that they deal with this problem first, before attempting to study and benefit from a spiritual teaching. If the mind is full of established thoughts and biases it is impossible to graft true spirituality on top of such an unsuitable basis.
- o Spiritual seekers inevitably have preconceptions and mental models about the form and nature of higher studies, and these are almost always at variance with the reality of a real esoteric school.

People who do not understand how higher teachings operate, or who have been trained to think in a shallow manner about them, are naturally confused when they meet written and spoken materials which do not fit into their preconceived patterns.

Nowhere is this more strikingly evidenced than in the matter of communication and relationships.

After hearing a few hundred people explain how they feel, after reading a few dozen letters from 'seekers', even a machine would surely see the pattern of shallow assumption upon which even the most ardent of this type allow themselves to work.

People who live in approximately the same area think that they should be grouped together, willy-nilly. People who are not of a mind to read books agitate for 'personal contact'. People who live in distant places crave travels, visits, materials to devour. People with whom you have been out of formal contact become distressed, bitter, interested in sources of readier gratification. People jealously (if unconsciously) cherish the 'cult of the Center', whose distinguishing mark is the belief that 'If I could only go to such-and-such a place all would be well.'

Virtually none of these people has any true concept of how a real community comes into being, how it develops, how its local manifestations are working, what its future might be – how they could benefit from what is being done.

If you circulate people with details of how a local class or group is run, they all want to be in a local class or group. It is just like mentioning a lollipop to a child: it may have been thinking about something else, but this key-word can possess its

thinking mechanism to the exclusion of everything else.

For a moment, as an exercise, transpose this situation into some other field, and you will see that such behaviour is so primitive, so crude, so unfortunately wasteful of energy, of understanding, of everything, that it is obvious that something has to be done for such people. Anyone prone to such behaviour-patterns is in no position to benefit from any higher knowledge at that point. He is, however, a suitable prey for one or other of the people or bodies which offer instant assuagement of tensions by going along with the individual's infantile behaviour. (55)

Intellectual and Systematic Approaches

'The man of God is not an expert made by books'

Rumi

- o People have been trained to believe that they can understand everything through the processes of logic, scholasticism and intellectualism.

Most people nowadays are educated by means of mechanical thinking and within very limited frameworks which, in turn, enable them only to handle certain kinds of experience. This education is excellent, but only for its own purposes. Products of this training use its impoverished and restricted principles to "assess" such things as Sufi learning. No wonder we get bizarre results!

Rumi tells of a Sufi and a grammarian who were sitting together. The grammarian announced that 'A word must be one of three things' referring to the grammatical assessment. At once the Sufi went into a frenzy and cried out: 'I have struggled for twenty years in the hope that there was more to a word than this, and now you have removed my hope!'

In this way the Sufi tried to point out to the grammarian that his terms of study were far too narrow, and certainly could not be sustained without the preamble that 'this holds true in grammar' . . . (56)

- o Individuals who are compulsive readers, full of book knowledge and facts, often make poor students of the inner way. Their accumulated study is often wasted effort because it is "an unsuitable graft upon an unprepared basis."
- o Those who have been trained in a certain pattern, such as scholasticism, do not have the tools to assess higher developmental teachings. 'You cannot use the instruments of carpentry for watchmaking.'

Q: Why is it that we in the West have so much difficulty in getting to grips with the mystical thinking of the East, in spite of the fact that so many people have spent their lives studying Eastern mysticism, and indeed, have become great teachers?

A: In the West, there is very little perception as to the vast range of teaching and quality of that teaching which exists in the East.

The problem of the investigator collecting information about it is that he does

not know how to learn. He is a mere assembler of facts or experiences. As a collector, he organizes and passes on information gained from what may seem to be the same, but are frequently different varieties of a central fact or activity. He passes on these distortions, sometimes further complicated, to you. In the process, if he is an academic worker, he transmits 'cold' material. (57)

- o People will typically bring their narrow, limiting assumptions and desire for familiar concepts to the door of any spiritual teaching. The tendency for the oversimplification of ideas and the either-or method of thought prevents progress in the spiritual area. Jalaluddin Rumi says: *'Things which seem to be opposed may, in reality, be working together.'*
- o Previously accumulated information regarding spiritual paths and teachings can actually act as an impediment to higher understanding and the development of inner knowledge. "Limited thinking, however useful for limited purposes, 'veils' human potential."
- o Academic or intellectual approaches towards a depth teaching are usually ineffective and may actually be destructive to a person's capacity to learn. "One of the malaises of the age is to assume that everything can be studied or taught through the artificial framework of the intellect. The role of intellectualism in mystical studies is only to tell the seeker that he can reach no fulfillment through the intellect alone."
- o There is a strong human need for order, regularity and familiarity in almost all forms of human activity, even in metaphysical teachings where these factors may not apply.

Q: In all forms of study known to me there is regularity and organization, a system, which is adhered to. Surely it is no wonder that people look for system, and not surprising that if they do not find it, they cease to be interested.

A: Rumi likens the stages of a journey by sea to one on land, and also makes clear the differences between the two, does he not. He tells us that, whereas the landmarks are visible – which I will call the familiar system – when going by land, the equivalent stages, if you are traveling by sea, are not visible in the same way, not marked. They are known to the Captain. The ship's captain knows them, but they are not told to landsmen, since they are not able to understand. Can you therefore say that the system is not there, and that it is not being carried out? Certainly not. Do you now see that you are asking for the recipe for making jam by the method for growing wheat? (58)

- o People interested in spiritual teachings often try to reinterpret the ideas presented to them in terms of some previous system of thought (religious, psychological, sociological and so on). "Everyone has the compulsive habit of relating everything that comes into his mind with as many other things as the pattern of his thoughts allows."

A large part of this problem is the powerful tendency nowadays to place all people, things, ideas, into specialist categories. Categories may be all very well – who could do without them? – but when any matter is being studied and there is only a limited choice of label offered, the experience can seem like being told

by Henry Ford that, 'You can have any colour automobile, providing that it is black.' (59)

- o One of the major characteristics of the modern Western mind is the tendency to organize prematurely, thus defeating the impact of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional inner teaching.

It is preferable that materials designed to *introduce a new range of thinking and perceiving* avoid trying to be prematurely coherent. Many find this the stumbling point, for people who think well have schemata well-developed for the straight explanation.

There is a problem in trying to be coherent at any cost. In one experiment people were shown a scene that was blurred. It was brought into focus in full view. Some people were asked to make guesses about the scene when it was quite blurred; some were not. As the scene came more clearly into view, everyone was asked to identify the scene. *Those who were asked to guess when the scene was blurred did much worse than those who did not guess.*

It seems that early hypotheses seem to take on a life of their own and interfere with later ability to perceive. I am sure that much of the writing in the metaphysical area is both the product of such early blurred glimpses, and the cause of further misunderstandings. It is for this reason that many of the current writings that I am discussing do not describe metaphysical reality, the nature of the seeker and the universe, et cetera – so that the student cannot prematurely organize it according to his own limited principles. (60)

- o People often seek simple systems and explanations rather than the experiences which alone can prepare one for further understanding. They settle for systems of thought which are incomplete but seem to answer some of the questions.
- o People choose selected ideas and practices from the whole array of a mature inner teaching, believing that such bits and pieces represent a meaningful picture of spiritual activity. "The individual concepts and formulae (which so interest people who are trying to build general theories) are secondary, spin-offs, from something which is ultimately much more useful."
- o There is a problem with the random adoption of spiritual teachings and the attempt to extract portions of them for secondary purposes. Some people try to "take apart traditional systems and remake them in a more viable form than they already are."

The fact that some Sufi and other teaching material is available in general-circulation books has produced two effects: (1) Some people familiarize themselves with the material, and then approach legitimate Sufi sources if they wish to enter into comprehensive studies. This is, of course, one purpose of the publications mentioned. (2) Others, who are probably in the majority, but whose efforts are insubstantial, attempt to employ the materials to teach themselves or others, while lacking the essential experiences upon which alone such teaching functions can be productively sustained. Their enthusiasm or ambition outruns their preparedness to learn correctly.

The parallel with more familiar learning systems can usefully be invoked again here. The random-adopters may be said to be doing themselves and others as much

good as people who know nothing about medical science would if they were to read a few books and buy a few medicaments. 'Truth seeks you totally. Make sure that you really seek it.' (61)

- o When new ideas are introduced into a culture, it may be necessary to present the teachings in ways which are acceptable and familiar. However this process can only be carried so far before corrupting the actual teaching.

Say, for instance, that people are doubtful of the advantages of a new commodity but can see how it would fit in with their existing lives by reference to established commerce, customs or preoccupations. Both they and the people representing the commodity would be pleased. But how far should either party go? Should the 'intending consumers' only concentrate upon the aspects of the new commodity which please them or reinforce their attitudes or ways? Should the introducers of the commodity put disproportionate effort into explaining these aspects, when the result might be to present the commodity inadequately, or occupy too much of one's time and energy? Again we have the matter of balance in where attention is put, and by whom. (62)

Mixing Spiritual Traditions

- o Many spiritual seekers invent their own spiritual path by borrowing and combining methods, ideas and techniques from a whole range of inner traditions.

One occasionally meets people who have sort of nailed or cobbled together a philosophy for themselves out of various bits and pieces. You will then find they are perhaps reciting a Buddhist mantra, reading to Sufi music dressed in a garment belonging to some other philosophy, and following a diet based on something else again.

Not to put too fine a point on it, one cannot take significant techniques or aspects of one philosophical teaching and try and match it with another, and heaven prevent one from taking a philosophical teaching, which may be the Tradition – it may be Buddhism, Taoism, or a number of other philosophical systems – to which they add some sort of spooky thing like stars, the Tarot, omens, or various different superstitions. This leads to complete confusion." (63)

- o It is not possible to effectively mix different formulations for spiritual development. This is equivalent to combining different recipes when cooking a meal – the result is a mishmash which could even be poisonous.

Q: How can I combine different methods of study, retaining the ones which I have found useful in the past?

A: Just as surely as you seek to find two dawns in one single day." (64)

People involved in their own studies have failed to stick to a single curriculum. They have collected all kinds of esoteric, religious and similar fragments from

all kinds of sources, and tried to link them; or, at all events, to include them in their thinking. In other words, they have attempted to do the reverse of what any lucid teaching system requires.

Spiritual study does not differ from any other purposeful and acceptable teaching in any area. It requires the student to follow a series of carefully selected and graded steps, without incorporating imagination, assumptions, materials from elsewhere, or concepts originating with other times, places and people. In a word, it is a complete system whenever projected. (65)

- o The common tendency among spiritual seekers to the attempt to amalgamate ideas, practices and exercises from one esoteric teaching with those of another is self-defeating. “This attempt in itself is evidence of low-level understanding which must be transcended before the School can communicate effectively with such an individual.”

Whether in the West or in the East, there is a temptation among certain peoples to do something we call agglomeration, which means the gathering together of all sorts of different things. This sort of activity is perfectly understandable and reasonable, and in certain contexts or circumstances it is useful, laudable, rewarding and even indicated.

However, when you get a coming-together of factors which seem to be similar and you then try and put them together in a haphazard fashion; even with a good and reasonable intention, this very often leads to considerable confusion.

This is what is called the supermarket mentality in which you are shopping around. It's no laughing matter, because say you do an exercise in the context of the Tradition and you use a Zen technique, breathing position or movement. Even if the two are not mutually exclusive, they will still produce a certain degree of confusion because although they may both be of a positive nature, they do not apply in the same way. A Zen position requires a Zen intention and a Zen form of breathing. You cannot take one thing and put it together with something else simply because it is more exciting, more convenient, more interesting, and “everybody else does it.”

Not only is this a recipe for confusion, but it literally encourages the person to shop around. Now why do people shop around? Because of a characteristic conditioning in the West: they want immediate results now. Or else they want excitement. Or they want a “feeling of something.” (66)

- o There are many drawbacks to combining various inner teachings according to personal whims and proclivities. Effective ‘higher nutrition’ requires a certain quantity, quality and time-frame for the learning process. This process is defeated by mixing various metaphysical teachings.

At almost any stage, people try to mix the ideas and activities of various teachings, according to what appears to suit them. The consequence is never effective. You may produce something attractive by this method, but never anything which works.

Remember the story of the man who dug a hole and then decided that the earth which he had brought up was untidy: so he burrowed into the ground again to make a hole to dispose of the earth . . .

One of the worst results of mixing various teachings is when the relevance of a

teaching activity is transferred: producing entertainment but removing the effect.

A modern story which pinpoints this tendency is the one of the man who bought a clock which gained, instead of one which kept correct time.

‘Why have a clock which shows an hour extra every half-hour?’ someone asked him.

‘Don’t you understand? It’s doing 50% more in the same time as yours!’ (67)

Imposing Conditions of Study

- o The assumptions, expectations and preconceptions that the seeker brings when encountering a spiritual teaching often leads to a desire to retain choice and control over what he or she does or believes.

Besides insincerity, the most common mistake is for novices to (unknowingly) insist the conditions of study be on their terms. They may come into a study system with all sorts of preconceptions and expectations – a hidden agenda or mental model as to what they believe should be happening and what they should be doing in order to fulfill their goal. Novices *want* exercises when what they really need is information. They may wish to dance and sing when all they first need to do is read. Neophytes may want their teacher to give them more attention when they really need less. They may want study materials to be presented to them in a timely and orderly A-to-Z fashion whereas a non-sequential approach may be best. They might think they should be fasting, meditating, breathing a certain way; they may insist on celibacy, vegetarianism, or certain forms of exotic attire. (68)

- o The would-be student of spirituality who has been conditioned by previous modes of learning usually demands to be taught his or her own way, effectively preventing wider forms of understanding. “Students are not able to suggest a study or organizational programme when they are there to learn.”
- o Factors such as selective reading, following only the things which one decides are interesting or important, studying and doing only what is appealing – these postures produce no results in the field of metaphysics.
- o Would-be students of mystical teachings often expect to receive teachings on their own terms. “Nobody can hope to arrive at illumination if he thinks that he knows what it is, and believes that he can achieve it through a well-defined path which he can conceive at the moment of starting.”

The residue of pattern-thinking, plus a distinct immaturity of mind, cause people to attempt to enroll themselves in mysticism on their own terms. One of the first things taught to the disciple is that he may have an inkling of what he needs, and he may realize that he can get it from study and work under a master. But beyond that he can make no conditions. (69)

- o Many students attempt to prescribe the nature, conditions and timing of their own spiritual or

metaphysical studies. “The Path has its own requirements, and the things which people want to do are likely to be those which will help them to continue in the way in which they are already set, rather than in a direction which will break through their limitations.”

It is as if a schoolboy were to say: ‘Yes, teach me French, but teach me only at 4 p.m.’, or ‘I want to learn mathematics, but I will not do so in this particular class,’ or, again, ‘I would like to learn the principles of biology, but first I must have some information about tadpoles, because to my mind they are the most important thing.’

The fact is that you can learn only what you can be taught. If you impose or interpose conditions gained from speculation, emotion, imagination, intellect and so on, you will still have to learn how to learn. This means finding out how to collect knowledge, stage by correct stage, without the foregoing limitations.

The human being, not knowing what he really is, not knowing where he came from or where he can go to, is hardly in a position merely to assume that he should get his instruction in this or that form; or before he does anything else his warts should be charmed or his house set in order in a way which he happens capriciously, or even dedicatedly, to demand.

The first duty of the teacher is to make this plain and not to compromise with the superficial sentiments which many people believe are fundamentals.

Rumi says: ‘You are a lover of your own experience not of me/ You turn to me to feel your own emotion.’ (70)

- o In any learning situation there is little or no progress if people select only portions of the study materials or try to study them in the order and manner which they themselves choose.

Failure to observe simple rules of learning make it almost impossible to learn anything. Those who find this hard to follow need only imagine trying to learn mathematics, say, according to their own rules or curriculum; or trying to learn the alphabet only through working with the letters whose shape pleases them. (71)

- o Spiritual seekers frequently ask that spiritual ideas and teachings be simplified or packaged in ways which are more acceptable to them. Primitive thinking about the learning process leads people to believe that they must be taught at the same time, in the same surroundings and in the same manner.
- o It is often assumed that working things through by discussion and debate is beneficial in all educational situations. “Discussion is useful only in matters requiring discussion. It may be of less value when it is only a matter of someone who insists on discussion, needed or otherwise: the *need* to discuss.”

Supposing that you are in a boat and you find someone who is in danger of drowning. In that boat you have a rope, and you call to the drowning man or woman to catch hold of it. Now, if that individual starts to want to discuss matters such as the rope and the boat and any possible alternatives, what is the situation? There may be a drowning.

Now, someone else may come along, on the bank of the river, well-meaning but trying to give instructions and encouragement and all kinds of messages to the drowning person. What is your responsibility? Do you try to get the rope to the

threatened one, or do you oppose the interrupter, or spend time in explaining what you are doing?

The comparison of the efforts of others, if seen from the perspective of the rescue operation, is irrelevant. It is simply because you have the means and the perspective that you offer the rope and not talk. It is merely because of lack of it that the threatened person does not see the situation. It is for the same reason of lack of relevance at that moment that the well-wisher on the bank is concentrating upon opinion and reassurance. This is as far as we can go in words, while the water threatens and the means to escape it are at hand. We must use only the minimum of words and the maximum of actions. But the success of the effort still depends upon the rope being thrown, and the other individual grasping it. (72)

- o Aspirants who approach a spiritual teaching may unconsciously attempt to manipulate the teaching process. “Spiritual activity is not a matter of someone winning and someone losing, or of easy gains without effort: or of gains by randomly adopted forms of effort.”
- o Many spiritual aspirants approach a spiritual teaching with a ‘commercial’ or ‘supply-and-demand’ attitude. They view the transmission of higher knowledge almost as a business transaction.
- o One form of approach typical of spiritual seekers has been termed ‘bargaining.’ “As with more material gifts, they cannot stipulate the nature, extent and timing of their bestowal. One cannot bargain with someone who has gifts to offer.”
- o Students must accept the fact that in certain teaching situations specialists are necessary to convey the information and knowledge that are central to real learning and development.

People want approval, not information. If they will accept information, they can gain skill and then can become effective. We say this to them. If they won’t accept it, this really means that they are rejecting us and in effect dictating policy and even tactics.

How does this accord with *our* role? In any teaching situation, one must teach and the other learn. This is why we say, ‘Will you allow me to teach?’

People who are saying ‘Will you teach me?’ seldom really want to learn. Or, at best, they have a priority: that they shall be allowed to carry out their own subjective role first. They are, as it were, interposing a sort of circus between themselves and the teaching situation.

The only answer to this is for them to satisfy themselves first of all that they want to learn, and as to whether they accept the teacher and the teaching. If they do not, they are wasting a lot of time, both ours and theirs. (73)

- o It has been frequently observed that people will apply for a spiritual teaching but then not accept the response or direction that they receive.

Q: I wrote to you in great deal a month ago, enclosing a stamped envelope for your reply. All I have received so far is a list of books. What is your answer to my questions and request to see you soon.?

A: A personal letter to this individual would in fact have been useless, as we can see from his own words. He wants to learn, but he does not want to accept our response – our answer is only a list of books. In his judgment, this is not interesting enough, perhaps not enough of anything. Certainly we have annoyed, depressed or perplexed him by not answering his questions, in spite of the stamp which he enclosed for this service. Well, for the stamp he got the list of books. When will he ask himself as to whose judgment is correct in these matters, his or ours? Whether he needs the list of books or a letter containing answers to his questions?

But just as ‘no answer is in itself an answer’, so, too, an answer which the person cannot understand or profit from is no answer either. So we do not answer his questions. They have shown us that he needs books first.

But if he is not registering that he needs books, and in fact writes again quite baffled or annoyed, what is the use of sending him book lists or sending him silence?

Simply this, that there is always a chance that he will review his letter and your booklist, and realize his real situation and what you are in fact saying to him through the silence and booklist. If he does this, he will have carried out the first correct self-observation exercise, and should be able to go on from there. (74)

- o The requirements of any authentic spiritual teaching are similar to those that hold in almost any learning situation and cannot be effectively questioned or modified in any real sense. Students must respect, obey and follow the established patterns and methods of study in any field of accomplishment. “Learning is the reverse of choosing your own time, place and manner of instruction – and your own vacations.”

The test for those who are really interested to learn what can be learnt from a spiritual teaching is easy. It is exactly the same as the test which common sense applies to the learning of anything: Does the would-be learner want to learn what there is to be learnt, in the manner, in the company, and with the materials, timing and methods, which are necessary to the time, place, situation of the pupil and the learning? Or does the learner want to proceed in ways which he or she feels are the right ones? (75)

Mistrusting the Teacher and the Teachings

- o A characteristic posture of would-be students is to attempt to assess and measure the reliability and worth of a teacher before placing themselves in the mentor’s hands.
- o Most contemporary people in the West are not prepared to place their confidence, without concrete evidence, in those who are supposed to be able to guide their spiritual development. Yet: “When you go to a tailor to have a suit made, you use intelligence and logic to get you to the tailor’s door. After you have chosen the cloth and given your order, you abandon all to the tailor.”
- o The Western cultural milieu encourages an attitude of mind that has been labeled ‘nonrational

concern.’ This entails the belief that any teacher-student relationship will be based on a pattern of power, domination and submission. “The individual reared in a Western cultural setting is often at a disadvantage when faced with the problem of learning, because of his preoccupation with the question of “dominate or be dominated,” to which he gives intense and indiscriminating emphasis.

- o There is a widespread belief in both the East and West that the role of student in a spiritual school automatically means a loss of freedom and autonomy.

Almost all human beings are reared with some measure of self-reliance, which becomes a habit of thought. Through a quite natural lack of true reasoning, the idea of accepting guidance becomes confused with a loss of freedom. Most people – in East and West alike – do not realize that putting oneself in the hands of an expert implies no loss of personal importance. Inconsistently, they will allow a surgeon to remove their appendixes, but will dispute the superior knowledge or experience of a teacher in a field in which they are as ignorant as in surgery.

The uncritical carry-over of the sense of self-reliance into fields where it does not in fact operate is illustrated in this autobiographical fragment from a mystic: “I resolved that I should tread the mystic Path alone, and struggled to do so, until an inner voice said to me, ‘You go to a pathfinder to show you a road through a wilderness – or will you prefer to seek your own way and destroy yourself in the process?’” (76)

- o The attempts by students to analyze their teachers basically displays the assumptions and the thinking processes of the observer. “If the desire to test the teacher or oppose the teaching is too strongly marked, there is little prospect of the learning process taking place at all.”

Sufis constantly come across a paranoid reaction to what they say and do, among both the general populace and specialists in inner thought. And, short of that, there is always the question of the learner himself endlessly questioning (through a misapplication of the principle of judgment) the meaning and motives of authentic mystical systems.

Saadi (*Bostan*) has another telling tale, well worth keeping in mind. It enables one to register that a person’s ability to judge situations, if he is not thoroughly competent in the field in question, may seriously malfunction:

Faridun, the Persian King of about 700 B.C., had a minister who was reported to have lent out gold and silver. He had also stipulated, Faridun learnt, that the loans were to be repaid on the death of the king.

The king was infuriated and charged the man with plotting against him. The minister answered:

‘I wanted all the people to wish you long life. By imposing the condition, I ensured that they would pray for your extended health.’ (77)

- o The psychological attitude of seekers who adopt either submissive or dismissive approaches to spiritual teachers has an underlying common basis – the desire for certainty. “Making preconditions, like the desire for or dislike of certitude, is not a posture which will lead to learning. Only those can learn who will learn what *is* there, not those who want to learn through a method which they bring as their commanding principle.”

- o Aphorisms are sometimes utilized in spiritual teachings to stress the importance of reliance and trust in the journey to human completion.

Q: Prudence requires one to look before one leaps.

A: Prudence would require one not to leap at all. Hariri says: "Safety is on the river's bank." (78)

Preparation and Information Precede Understanding

- o Most people who are interested in spiritual teachings are deficient in terms of their background of information and orientation. Specialized knowledge and techniques, as well as the proper approach, are required to access advanced esoteric knowledge.
- o In order to gain higher knowledge the student may first have to learn other things which act as preparation for further understanding.

When given materials or ideas to study, you have to learn to give all of them equal attention.

Realize that you have in the past been consuming selectively: That is, welcoming what you think you want and ignoring or malforming what you think you do not need.

Such a procedure, in any form of learning, can lead to nothing.

Prejudice, opinion, attitude, are of value in learning only when they enable a person to study effectively. They have, however, been mistakenly elevated into virtues by themselves.

The result is that a person tends to learn only what he has been trained (by himself and others) to learn. This leaves gaps when he is faced by deep knowledge. Unimportant in ordinary matters, these gaps are pitfalls in a more advanced stage.

Man thinks that he needs knowledge. He may, in fact, need techniques: knowing how to learn. This can sound less dramatic, less exciting, less beguiling than vague promises – so people do not bother with it. (79)

- o Western cultures are full of confusion, imagination and lack of information concerning the activity of genuine schools of inner development.

In the final analysis, true teachings can only work with people who are prepared to learn whatever there is to be learned, not people who want to use us for entertainment and 'game' purposes, however unconscious they may be of what they are doing.

It is in order to carry out this educational project that real teaching institutions first of all have to broaden the basis of the student's attitudes to higher knowledge. There is an analogy here with the ordinary educational systems. In the latter, specialization and higher studies often have to be preceded by general studies which form the basis for the future studies. Many an undergraduate has wondered why he has to study botany or bacteriology before he can learn how to heal people as a

physician. He is in fact receiving factual information, learning a skill and also exercising his brain in a manner which will enable him to cope with more complex things.

Real study centers of higher knowledge really are institutes of higher studies which up to a point, have to lay the foundation of their studies as they go along.

The habit of questioning the curriculum, however indicative of an enquiring mind, may often be very much out of control. If one does not know what questions to ask, there is less value in asking questions than one might imagine from the knowledge that questions may be asked.

The very idea that one can learn what one wants to learn, when one wants to, in the right manner, is appealing and therefore not recognized as insidious because it destroys the capacity to learn. (80)

- o Without proper preparation students are prone to confusion and misunderstanding when embarking on the search for higher knowledge.

While people continue to think that they can work out truth while still a prey to confusions and suppositions, they will not find it. That they have chosen not to prepare themselves and instead to try the impossible has not gone unnoticed even in the youthful Western culture. Shakespeare's Banquo said:

'If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which seed will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me . . .' (81)

- o A Sufi tale shows how people who lack important information can actually cause harm and confusion.

In a Sufi teaching story, Mullah Nasrudin illustrates that man tries to improve on his knowledge, his techniques, his capacities in life, but he may lack other basic knowledge without which he is in fact doing harm. Nasrudin finds a hawk with a curved beak and talons. He has only seen pigeons before, so he thinks that this bird is deformed. He cuts its claws and beak until they are straight. 'This', goes the moral, 'is what you try to do with metaphysical teaching. If you realize this, you will truly start to learn.' (82)

- o People can learn more effectively and efficiently if they remove unnecessary complications and misunderstandings which they introduce into the learning process.

People frequently bemoan their inability to understand the Teaching, or this or that part of the Teaching.

Their problem is in reality simple: it is *they* who make it complicated.

These are the two major complications which these people introduce, and which can be resolved only by the right kind of contact with a real spiritual group:

1. You must know whether a given thing is comprehensible at your level, and whether you are trying to understand something out of due phase and relevancy. To assume that you should always be able to understand everything without the

preparation necessary for it is an absurdity.

2. You could understand almost infinitely more than you are at present capable of understanding if you would only surrender your taste for minor satisfactions or bring this taste under control. By this I mean that man has to be able to detach from greed for knowledge, greed for such things as attention by others, greed for being thought something or somebody. Man must detach, if he is a real student, from playing psychotherapeutic or social games and calling these 'trying to learn', or 'associating with people of wisdom', or 'performing initiatory rituals'. Students can start to understand esoteric matters when they stop feeding their superficial 'selves' omnivorously with superficial materials and calling them significant ones. People can start to learn when they are willing to accept the possibility that the very evidences of 'something higher' in themselves may in fact not be reliable, and may even be screening them from real perceptions.

If you want to learn, and not just to play at it, start to conceive the possibility that the foregoing remarks may be true, and could be as reliable as, or more reliable than, the simplifications of the systems with which you are familiar. (83)

- o Basic information about spiritual teachings can remove many of the misconceptions and misunderstandings held by seekers of higher knowledge.

Q: Two statements which seem to be repeated a lot are that we need information before we need knowledge; and that truly higher learning is generally 'contrary to expectation'. I have difficulty in understanding these thoughts.

A: I can easily answer both in three simple examples:

1. You need the information that: many true teachers do not look like what you imagine teachers to be. Their appearance will therefore be contrary to your expectation. This expectation is based upon your imagination, upon cultural transmission or upon other people's pictures.
2. You need the information that: you are surrounded by teaching materials which you would never dream to be such, because they are not associated in your brain with teaching materials. Hence when you do have them pointed out to you, they appear to be 'contrary to expectation'.
3. You tend to expect teachings to be put in a manner similar to the way in which higher teachings have been put in the past. You imagine that ancient teachings, in their traditionalistic form, are somehow superior to the same thing put in today's terms. You need information about this. If your expectation is that you may be able to torture concealed meanings, say, out of ancient texts, when you come across the manner of true contemporary learning, it will be 'contrary to expectation.' (84)

- o One of the consequences of insufficient information and background is an inability to evaluate whether a spiritual teaching is comprehensive or not. "Is the lack of recognition of gold due to the incapacity or negligence of the assessor, or to the nature of the metal itself?"
- o In order to benefit from a mystical teaching the student must be properly fitted for the task so as to ask the right questions and profit from the answers. "People ask the wrong questions

because they lack basic information. They lack it because they do not look for it: not because it is not there.”

- o Many spiritual seekers possess only scraps of undigested information and experience, while believing that they already have attained knowledge and wisdom. “There is a widespread lack of real higher experience, as distinct from imagined experience. There is a serious lack of suitable information about areas of higher study which are not generally known nor reproduced in books.”
- o Some of the characteristic tendencies of spiritual seekers which prevent learning and understanding have been identified and published in the literature.

The following notes, taken from actual instances, will show current tendencies, and can help one to operate in a different manner – without exercising or affecting laudable elements in the inherent and learnt characteristics.

1. Unconscious seeking of one’s own advantage.
2. Frequent discussion or repetition of a subject, instead of making a decision and carrying it through or attempting to do so.
3. Acceptance of co-operation without extending parallel co-operativeness.
4. Assertions take the place of actions. Brushing suggestions aside, a strategy for avoiding action.
5. Laziness
6. Confusing one thing with another.
7. Failure to observe that one’s actions do not match one’s words; speech without thought.
8. Anxiety as a device to avoid action.
9. Once, accepting someone’s competence to guide or advise; arguing, heedlessness or attempted modification (‘negotiation’). (85)

- o Certain researchers have identified some of the factors which are involved in the study of esoteric knowledge and the pitfalls which exist in such an enterprise.

In order for a study to be launched and its performance maintained, it is necessary that facts which inhibit or prevent the development of the study be thoroughly known. All over the world, at all times, people have been carrying out studies in philosophy, metaphysics, religion, without realizing that the materials which they study, the way in which they study them, and the factors which influence individuals and groups must be understood in a certain manner. Here are some brief remarks on this subject:

1. People behave in certain ways due to their cultural, national and psychological background. This behaviour colours their whole being. Not knowing this, they attribute naturally-arising reactions to the 'teaching'.
2. People organize themselves into groups without realizing that group organization can be fatal to learning. Certain types of group exist only for the group, although the members do not know it. Groups can actually become 'religious' even though no religion is being studied.
3. Random or systematized study of certain ideas is next to useless. It is one thing to have an open mind; it is another to think that one can choose the materials which one should study when one is not aware of the special circumstances of study needed and the special personnel of a group needed for special studies.
4. Many 'teachings' and ideas come to their students strongly influenced by local cultural modes of expression. Unless this is known, and steps are taken to combat this, the result tends to be indoctrination with superficial and worse characteristics of the vehicle of the teaching.
5. People take 'ideas' which were intended to be 'prescribed' for specific situations and groups to enable them to learn. These they imagine are 'laws' or perennial truths. The result is a mechanical system which is next to useless.
6. People study a man and his work through doctrines and personality conceptions which do not apply to that man or that work. They get lost in this enterprise. (86)

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