

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Without self-knowledge, without understanding the working and functions of his being, man cannot be free, he cannot govern himself and he will always remain a slave, and the plaything of the forces acting upon him. This is why in all ancient teachings the first demand at the beginning of the way to liberation was: "Know Thyself."

G.I. Gurdjieff

‘Know Thyself’

- o The journey of spiritual development and self-realization begins with self-study. The words of Socrates – ‘Know thyself’ – are a signpost for all those who seek true knowledge and being.

Gnothi Seauton – Know Thyself. These words were inscribed above the entrance to the temple of Apollo at Delphi, site of the sacred Oracle. In ancient Greece, people would visit the Oracle hoping to find out what destiny had in store for them or what course of action to take in a particular situation. It is likely that most visitors read those words as they entered the building without realizing that they pointed to a deeper truth than anything the Oracle could possibly tell them. They may not have realized either that, no matter how great a revelation or how accurate the information they received, it would ultimately prove to be to no avail, would not save them from further unhappiness and self-created suffering, if they failed to find the truth that is concealed in that injunction – Know Thyself. What these words imply is this: Before you ask any other question, first ask the most fundamental question of your life: Who am I? (1)

- o A person must know themselves before they can know others and the world itself. That is why the path of knowledge begins with the study of oneself and ‘learning how to learn.’

The human form is a microcosm of the universe. All that supposedly exists outside in reality exists in us. The world is in you and can become known in you, as you. What then is this ‘you’?

As a human being related to all living beings we must first be related to ourselves. We cannot understand, love and welcome others without first knowing and loving ourselves. Generally, however, we spend our whole lives involved in what is apparently outside us without ever looking at what is closest. We give no time to the thorough reading of our own book, our reactions, resistances, tensions, emotional states, physical stresses and so on. This reading requires no system or specially allotted time spent in introspection. It involves only facing oneself during the day without the habitual identification with an individual center of reference, an I-image, a personality, a propagator of viewpoints. (2)

- o Self-knowledge requires a new perspective of ‘seeing yourself with eyes other than your own’ and understanding how your body-mind reacts to the experiences of life. “Observe without

analysis the way in which you react physically, emotionally and mentally in the different circumstances of everyday life.”

- o Our reactions to the situations of everyday life provide constant opportunities for self-knowledge and insight. “Be interested in how you function in daily life, explore without any criticism or justification. Simply take note; that is enough.”

In day-to-day activities, in moment-to-moment living, can the spirit of questioning and nonjudgmental attending continue to reveal and clarify the ways of the self?

It is arduous to look at ourselves in fearless honesty, uninfluenced by ideas and images of what we are or should be. It is easier to cling to the apparent security of our automatic patterns of thinking and reacting, but these inevitably bring conflict and sorrow.

Only with clear and immediate insight can the mind begin to free itself from its conditioning, opening up to the depth of understanding that is compassion. (3)

- o One of the purposes of self-knowledge is to remove barriers to understanding, to ‘polish’ the surface personality and release human potential, allowing the essential self to emerge and ‘shine.’ “Man has to come to understand how to see himself as he really is, so that he can achieve something in the area which he calls ‘what he might be’.”

- o Self-knowledge grows as we objectively explore the nature of body, mind and feelings in a detached, nonjudgmental manner. “Self-knowledge is an aim, but it is also a means. Self-knowledge is a means of deeper self-understanding, and ultimately of self-realization.”

To face ourselves scientifically we must accept the facts as they are without agreement, disagreement or conclusion. It is not a mental acceptance, an acceptance of ideas, but is completely practical, functional. It requires only alertness. Attention must be bipolar. We see the situation and at the same time see how it echoes in us as feeling and thought. In other words, the facts of a situation must include our own reactions. We remain in the scientific process free from judgment, interpretation and evaluation, only looking in different moments of the day at our psychological, intellectual and physical ground and our level of vitality. There is no motive, no interference from a ‘me,’ no desire to change, grow or become.

In this way we become more intimate with ourselves, more aware of how we function from moment to moment in everyday life. When we are explorers, real listening appears automatically and in listening there is openness, receptivity. Exploration never becomes a fixation with a goal to be achieved. It remains as a welcoming that brings originality and life to every moment. (4)

- o In order to understand who we really are we first need to understand what we are not through a process of self-inquiry and detached self-examination.

Q: What does it mean to know myself? By knowing myself what exactly do I come to know?

A: All that you are not.

Q: And not what I am?

A: What you are, you already are. By knowing what you are not, you are free of it and remain in your own natural state. It all happens quite spontaneously and effortlessly.

Q: But ultimately what am I?

A: The ultimate denial of all you are not.

Q: I do not understand!

A: It is your fixed idea that you must be something or other, that binds you. (5)

Discover all that you are not. Body, feelings, thoughts, ideas, time, space, being and not-being, this or that – nothing concrete or abstract you can point to is you. A mere verbal statement will not do – you may repeat a formula endlessly without any result whatsoever. You must watch yourself continuously – particularly your mind – moment by moment, missing nothing. This witnessing is essential for the separation of the self from the not-self. (6)

Self-Observation

*The study of the Way requires self-encounter along the way.
You have not met yourself yet.*

- o Self-study and observation precedes and prepares for self-knowledge. “It is necessary to begin from the beginning. A man must begin observing himself as though he did not know himself at all, as though he had never observed himself.”

Knowledge of oneself is a very big, but a very vague and distant aim. Man in his present state is very far from self-knowledge. Therefore, strictly speaking, his aim cannot even be defined as self-knowledge. Self-study must be his big aim. It is quite enough if a man understands that he must study himself. It must be man’s aim to begin to study himself, *to know himself*, in the right way.

Self-study is the work or the way which leads to self-knowledge.

But in order to study oneself one must first learn *how to study*, where to begin, what methods to use. A man must learn how to study himself, and he must study the methods of self-study.

The chief method of self-study is self-observation. Without properly applied self-observation a man will never understand the connection and the correlation between the various functions of his machine, will never understand how and why on each separate occasion everything in him ‘happens.’ (7)

- o Directly observing our physical, emotional and mental functioning is the first stage of self-observation and must precede any attempts at analysis or interpretation.

There are two methods of self-observation: *analysis*, or attempts at analysis, that is, attempts to find the answers to the questions: upon what does a certain thing depend, and why does it happen; and the second method is registering, simply '*recording*' in one's mind what is observed at the moment.

Self-observation, especially in the beginning, must on no account become analysis or attempts at analysis. Analysis will only become possible much later when a man knows all the functions of his machine and all the laws which govern it.

Attempts to analyze separate phenomena without a knowledge of general laws are a completely useless waste of time. Before it is possible to analyze even the most elementary phenomena, a man must accumulate a sufficient quantity of material by means of 'recording.' 'Recording,' that is, the result of a direct observation of what is taking place at a given moment, is the most important material in the work of self-study. When a certain number of 'records' have been accumulated and when, at the same time, laws to a certain extent have been studied and understood, analysis becomes possible. (8)

- o The actual process of self-observation itself produces self-change. "Human possibilities are very great. You cannot conceive even a shadow of what a person is capable of attaining."

Self-study and self-observation, if rightly conducted, bring man to the realization of the fact that something is wrong with his machine and with his functions in their ordinary state. A man realizes that it is precisely because he is asleep that he lives and works in a small part of himself. It is precisely for this reason that the vast majority of his possibilities remain unrealized, the vast majority of his powers are left unused. A man feels that he does not get out of life all that it can give him, that he fails to do so owing to definite functional defects in his machine, in his receiving apparatus. The idea of self-study acquires in his eyes a new meaning. He feels that possibly it may not even be worth while studying himself as he is now. He sees every function as it is now and as it could be or ought to be. Self-observation brings man to the realization of the necessity for self-change. And in observing himself a man notices that self-observation itself brings about certain changes in his inner processes. He begins to understand that self-observation is an instrument of self-change, a means of awakening. By observing himself he throws, as it were, a ray of light into his inner processes which have hitherto worked in complete darkness. And under the influence of this light the processes themselves begin to change. (9)

- o The process of self-observation allows us to separate from the conditioned personality and ego patterns that govern our life and prevent the full flowering of our potential.

Become the spectator, become aware of the natural flow of life, your motives, actions and what results from them. Observe the walls you have built around yourself. As you become more aware of your body and mind you will come to know yourself. As this image of things as you believe them to be subsides, you will have a clear insight of what you are – something quite other than a product of the mind. You will gradually feel less and less involved in whatever comes up and one day you will discover yourself to be in the perceiving. Once you free

yourself from the idea, “I am a body” and the consequences of this idea, you will awaken to your natural state of being. Give yourself up entirely to this discovery. True awareness cannot be obtained by projecting known factors in terms of concepts and perceptions. What you are fundamentally cannot be experienced through reason and is only reached once you eliminate what you are not. (10)

- o The process of change through self-observation may be slow, requiring patience and fortitude.

Self-observation is an art and science of its own, one that can be increasingly mastered over a lifetime. Following the ceaseless ebbs and flows of one’s mind is not as easy as it may sound. True self-observation in actuality requires consistently focused and regulated effort, in all kinds of situations, easy, difficult, or in-between. The first thing you learn is how surprisingly hard it is to sustain, even for a moment. Lest you become discouraged too soon, however, remember that you seldom know when you are learning or absorbing knowledge and often aren’t when you think you are. That is an immutable principle of real learning, as distinguished from indoctrination, conditioning and the like. Nonetheless, you will be able to notice small changes in yourself after a while, providing you do not seek them too strenuously. Uncritical acceptance of yourself *as is* is a precondition, and your improvements will subsequently manifest as gradual reductions in obsessive and compulsive tendencies, over-emotionalism, rationalization, and negativism. (11)

- o Detached and calm observation is the capacity and ability to look at oneself under different circumstances and see, and possibly preview, the nature of one’s reactions and behaviour.

Self-examination means that one should examine oneself, one’s attitudes and one’s responses to certain situations, to certain context, to certain people, in order to get to know oneself. For what purpose? One of the many varied forms in using this is to be able to develop a predictive ability: one develops a nose, a flair, for predicting a little bit in advance what one’s reaction might be to a particular thing, person, place or circumstance. (12)

- o As the practice of self-observation ripens and matures the ability to remain aware and in the present moment strengthens and deepens.

Through self-observation, more *presence* comes into your life automatically. The moment you realize you are not present, you *are* present. Whenever you are able to observe your mind, you are no longer trapped in it. Another factor has come in, something that is not of the mind: the witnessing presence.

Be present as the watcher of your mind – of your thoughts and emotions as well as your reactions in various situations. Be as least as interested in your reactions as in the situation or person that causes you to react. Notice also how often your attention is in the past or future. Don’t judge or analyze what you observe. Watch the thought, feel the emotion, observe the reaction. Don’t make a personal problem out of them. You will then feel something more powerful than any of those things that you observe: the still, observing presence itself behind the content of your mind, the silent watcher. (13)

- o The quality of observation and self-observation has different levels and degrees. “Observation is important in relation to the things observed, not to the faculty alone.”

A Sufi was a witness in a court case.

The judge said: “How many steps did this man fall down?”

The Sufi said, “I don’t know.”

“You mean to say that you put yourself forward as a witness,” shouted the Judge, “and you cannot answer a simple question?”

The Sufi said: “And how long has Your Honor been a judge in this court?”

“Twenty years.”

“And can you tell me the number of beams in the roof of this hall?” (14)

Approach and Orientation to Self-Study

‘The beginning for the Traveller on the Path is to start to look for faults in oneself which one previously sought in others; and to begin to perceive in others the merits which one formerly imagined to be one’s own.’

Idries Shah

- o An honest, non-critical assessment of one’s actual state is crucial in the process of spiritual self-development.

Q: If I feel myself to be ignorant, how can I start to acquire knowledge?

A: The ancient proverb is descriptive of this state: ‘Knowledge is in stating ignorance.’ (15)

- o In authentic spiritual teachings emphasis is placed on “the need to monitor one’s reactions to see why one is behaving in a certain way – self-observation without neurotic self-abasement.”

Examining oneself is not automatically blaming oneself. When you are examining yourself, you are examining your actions or reactions to situations in a constructive, not hostile way. You are examining yourself with patience, in a harmonious way, as a good friend of yourself – and as such, you do not attack and aggress against yourself.

Constructive criticism may be required – and it can even be harsh criticism if necessary – but use the same terms of reference in measuring or criticizing yourself as you would in the case of a very dear or cherished friend. (16)

- o With self-observation it is necessary to be impartial and not to expect any results. “What is important is to see oneself, to observe one’s mechanical, automatic, reactionary behaviour without comment, and without making any attempts to change that behaviour.”

- o Self-examination must be an objective non-judgmental activity, conducted as impartially as

possible. “What is essential is to become more acquainted with your intimate nature, your sensations, body tensions, feelings and desires, without making any judgment.”

The observer has no emotions. It’s like a mirror. Everything just passes in front of it. The mirror makes no judgment. Whenever we judge, we’ve added another thought that needs to be labeled. The observer is not critical. Judging is not something the observer does. The observer simply watches or reflects, like a mirror. If garbage passes in front of it, it reflects garbage. If roses pass in front of it, it reflects roses. The mirror remains a mirror, an empty mirror. The observer doesn’t even accept; it just observes. (17)

Instead of looking around constantly and judging everybody else, let us see our own behaviour: what we have done and what we have not done. We don’t need to judge ourselves, but simply notice how we act. If we start judging ourselves, we have set up an ideal, a certain way we think we must be. This also is not helpful. We need to see our actual thoughts, to be aware of what is actually true for us. If we do this, we will notice that whenever we judge, our body tightens up. Behind the judgment is a self-centered thought that produces tension in our body. Over time, that tension is harmful to us, and indirectly harmful to others. Not only is the tension harmful; the judgments we express about others (and ourselves) are harmful, too. (18)

- o Self-knowledge is a lifetime commitment of study and work, in which one gradually builds up a picture of oneself. The significance of persistence, of trying again and again, is encapsulated in a saying of Saadi: ‘Not every oyster holds a pearl; not every time does the archer hit his target.’
- o With continued practice the very act of observing ourselves, honestly and without judgment, dissolves the personality structures which block higher development and being.

We are slaves to what we do not know, whereas we are masters of what we do know. Whatever vice or weakness we uncover in ourselves, and whose causes and workings we come to understand, we overcome by the very knowing. The inadvertence dissolves when brought into the light of awareness. Just by opening ourselves, by allowing whatever is to remain in the light of awareness, we rob it of its power to harm. We must open ourselves in this way without any judgment, without any need to integrate, change, or do something else about whatever appears. This is the meditative counterpart to Christ’s injunction “Resist not evil” and “Love your enemies.” It is a very difficult practice, particularly when deep anxiety, raging anger, or the feelings of failure and of having wasted our lives are involved. But, nevertheless, if we go in this direction as best we can, we find more and more that these painful experiences are all based upon thoughts, that they come out of a warped awareness masking a still deeper pain, which in turn can be transmuted. The very fact of being able to do this, of being able to dissolve painful states in awareness, gives us a new confidence and assurance that we can cope with the complexity of life. (19)

- o Great stress is placed on sincerity in the process of self-observation. “A man must make the decision that he will be absolutely sincere with himself, will not close his eyes to anything, will not limit himself to any previously erected walls.”

Many things are necessary for observing. The first is sincerity with oneself. This is very difficult. It is much easier to be sincere with a friend. We find it difficult to look at ourselves, for we are afraid that we may see something bad, and if by accident we do look deep down, we see our own nothingness. We try not to see ourselves because we fear we shall suffer remorse of conscience. There are many dirty dogs in us, and we do not want to see them. Sincerity may be the key to the door through which one part may see another part. Sincerity is difficult because of the thick crust that has grown over essence. Each year a man puts on a new dress, a new mask, one over the other. All this has gradually to be removed. It is like peeling off the skins of an onion. Until these masks are removed we cannot see ourselves (20)

- o An important aspect of self-study is understanding the nature of our relationships with other people, indicated by the aphorism: ‘None should be worse off from having been in contact with me.’

A useful exercise is to try to put oneself in another’s place. For example, I know that A. is in a trying situation. He is dejected and morose. Half of him is trying to listen to me, the other half is occupied with his problem. I say something to him that at another time would make him laugh, but now it makes him angry. But knowing him I shall try to put myself in his place and ask myself how I would respond.

If I do this often enough I shall begin to see that if someone is bad-tempered there may be a reason for it which has nothing to do with me personally. We must try to remember that often it is not the person himself but his state that behaves irritably towards us. As I change, so does another.

If you can do this and remember yourself and observe yourself you will see many things, not only in the other person, but in yourself, things you never even thought of. ‘Only he can be just who can enter into the position of another’ and ‘Judge others by yourself and you will rarely be mistaken.’ (21)

- o The process of examining, monitoring and looking at oneself has a higher developmental function and purpose.

A man will notice that he cannot observe everything he finds in himself *impartially*. Some things may please him, other things will annoy him, irritate him, even horrify him. And it cannot be otherwise. Man cannot study himself as a remote star, as a curious fossil. Quite naturally he will like in himself what helps his development and dislikes what makes his development more difficult, or even impossible. This means that very soon after starting to observe himself, he will begin to distinguish *useful* features and harmful features in himself, that is useful or harmful from the point of view of his possible self-knowledge, his possible awakening, his possible development. He will see sides of himself which *can* become conscious, and sides which *cannot* become

conscious *and must be eliminated*. In observing himself, he must always remember that his self-study is the first step towards his possible evolution. (22)

- o The very process of calmly observing ourselves transforms our body, mind and feelings leading to a new level of inner development and being.

Be conscious of yourself, watch your mind, give it your full attention. Don't look for quick results; there may be none within your noticing. Unknown to you, your psyche will undergo a change, there will be more clarity in your thinking, charity in your feeling, purity in your behaviour. You need not aim at these – you will witness the change all the same. For, what you are now is the result of inattention and what you become will be the fruit of attention. (23)

Be the explorer of your body, your feelings and desires, your moods and psychic states. Drop all ideas about what you are. Live without knowing anything, like an explorer, for the adventure of discovery, from moment to moment.

In this exploration you'll see that you don't really observe, that you project your fears and desires and superimpose these onto the world. So all you see is your own conditioning, not the world as it really is. The awareness, the understanding of how you really function, not just psychologically but on every level, is itself transformation. If you try to make any voluntary changes all you are doing is shifting energy around a little and making things momentarily more comfortable for yourself. In the attitude of openness and exploration you automatically become silent. (24)

Observing the 'Secondary Self' or 'False Personality'

- o The 'Commanding Self' or 'Secondary Self' is described as a complex of reactions and barriers erected by the 'lower understanding.' This false personality (the conditioned or immature self) is the superficial (though necessary) intellectual-emotional system which hides or 'veils' the deeper individuality of the human being.

When observing himself, a man will record a whole series of very important aspects of his being. To begin with he will record with unmistakable clearness the fact that his actions, thoughts, feelings and words are the result of external influences and that nothing comes from himself. He will understand and see that he is in fact an automaton acting under the influences of external stimuli. He will feel his complete mechanicalness. Everything 'happens,' he cannot 'do' anything. He is a machine controlled by accidental shocks from outside. Each shock calls to the surface of his I's. A new shock and that I disappears and a different one takes its place. Another small change in the environment and again there is a new I. A man will begin to understand that he has no control of himself whatever, that he does not know what he may say or do the next moment, he will begin to understand that he cannot answer for himself even for the shortest length of time. He will understand that if he remains the same and does nothing unexpected, it is simply because no unexpected outside changes are taking place. He will under-

stand that his actions are entirely controlled by external conditions and he will be convinced that there is nothing permanent in him from which control could come, not a single permanent function, not a single permanent state. (25)

- o Understanding the nature of the lower self leads to higher developmental growth. “By bringing the operation of the commanding self into view, its limitations, distortions and peculiarities can be observed, both by the individual himself and by observers.”

The conquest of the “Commanding Self” is not achieved merely by acquiring control over one’s passions. It is looked upon as a taming of the wild consciousness which believes that it can take what it needs from everything (including mysticism) and bend it to its own use. The tendency to employ materials from whatever source for personal benefit is understandable in the partially complete world of ordinary life, but cannot be carried over into the greater world of real fulfillment. (26)

- o The light of awareness transforms the secondary personality by bringing into consciousness that which was previously hidden or unconscious. “Only living stillness, stillness without someone trying to be still, is capable of undoing the conditioning our biological, emotional and psychological nature has undergone.”

To become free of the ego is not really a big job but a very small one. All you need to do is be aware of your thoughts and emotions – as they happen. This is not really a “doing,” but an alert “seeing.” In that sense, it is true that there is nothing you can do to become free of the ego. When that shift happens, which is the shift from thinking to awareness, an intelligence far greater than the ego’s cleverness begins to operate in your life. Emotions and even thoughts become depersonalized through awareness. Their impersonal nature is recognized. There is no longer a self in them. They are just human emotions, human thoughts. Your entire personal history, which is ultimately no more than a story, a bundle of thoughts and emotions, becomes of secondary importance and no longer occupies the forefront of your consciousness. It no longer forms the basis for your sense of identity. You are the light of Presence, the awareness that is prior to and deeper than any thoughts and emotions. (27)

- o Self-deception and bias, two characteristics of the secondary self, prevent real knowledge and self-understanding.

A man once remarked, in the hearing of the Sufi ancient Junaid of Baghdad, that at that time it had become difficult to find brothers.

Junaid instantly identified the one-sidedness of this attitude. “If you seek a brother to share your burden, brothers are in truth hard to find. But if you are in search of someone whose own burden you yourself share, there is no scarcity of such brothers,” he said. (28)

- o A Mulla Nasrudin story from the Sufi tradition shows the perils of the human mind trying to work with the human mind.

The Sufi conception of *Nafs-i-Ammara* – the lower, ‘Commanding Self’ which ‘veils’ the ability to discern Reality – insists that anyone who tries to move ahead with spiritual activity without transforming this Self will destroy his gains.

The is illustrated in a Nasrudin tale, also attributed to the joker Joha and others in the Middle East.

One day Nasrudin sold his house to someone, but asked that he should be allowed to reserve for himself a square yard of the inside wall. Since the price was attractive, the buyer agreed. But soon Nasrudin was there, hammering a peg into the wall, on which he hung a pair of old shoes. He came and went, taking down the shoes and putting them up; and he was a slight annoyance – but the bargain that the house had been offset this in the mind of its new owner. But, as the days passed, Nasrudin started to hang more and more odoriferous objects on the wall, until the new owner could not even live there. He knew that Nasrudin was within his rights, and that the law would not help him; so he was forced to sell the house back to Nasrudin for next to nothing. (29)

- o By observing oneself from moment to moment the mechanisms of the conditioned self are clearly revealed. “Become more and more acquainted with your body-mind, how you function in daily life, your reactions, your resistance. It is the awareness of it that brings the change, that brings the purification.”

There is nothing to try to add or subtract from the life you are living. It takes only alertness to see habits of thinking and how these contract us. When we see that almost all of our existence is mechanical repetition we automatically step out of the pattern and into observing.

With the disappearance of the habit of being someone doing something, only naked attention remains and in its light the functioning of projection is made clear. The mind regains its natural sensitivity and flexibility and at the same time we feel freedom in relation to our environment. In open exploration, where you accept yourself scientifically, the day will come when you feel yourself completely autonomous and fulfilled without qualification. (30)

- o One important method of self-study, leading to the diminution of the secondary self, is to oppose habits for the purposes of self-observation.

Every grown-up man consists wholly of habits, although he is often unaware of it and even denies having any habits at all. All three centers are filled with habits and a man can never know himself until he has studied all his habits. The observation and the study of habits is particularly difficult because, in order to see and ‘record’ them, one must escape from them, free oneself from them, if only for a moment. So long as a man is governed by a particular habit, he does not observe it, but at the very first attempt, however feeble, to struggle against it, he feels and notices it. Therefore in order to observe and study habits one must try to struggle against them. This opens up a practical method of self-observation. It has been said before that a man cannot change anything in himself, that he can only observe and ‘record.’ This is true. But it is also true that a man cannot observe and ‘record’ anything if he does not try to struggle with himself, that is, with his habits. This struggle cannot yield direct results, that is to say, it cannot lead to any change,

especially to any permanent and lasting change. But it shows what is there. Without a struggle a man cannot see what he consists of. The struggle with small habits is very difficult and boring, but without it, self-observation is impossible. (31)

- o When we cease to identify with our body and actions, our thoughts and feelings, we realize that the ‘observing self’ or ‘witness’ is the one element in our lives that never changes.

Your parents have given you a shape and a name. Your education and environment attribute many qualifications to you and you identify with these. In other words, society has given you an idea of being someone. So when you think of yourself, you think in terms of a man with all the various qualifications that accompany this image. This accumulation has gone through many changes yet *you* are aware of them. You can remember when you were seven. You can recall when you had no beard. This indicates that there’s an observer of these changes. The ability to observe change means that the change is in you, you are not in the change, for if you were how could you observe it? So what really belongs to the insight is what is changeless in you. You are the witness of all change but this witness never changes. So the real question is, “How can I become acquainted with the witness?” (32)

Regulating Conditioning and Behaviour

- o The cravings and mental attitudes that characterize the secondary self have to be seen for what they are and treated accordingly. A saying of Rumi is applicable: *‘The satiated man and the hungry one do not see the same thing when they look upon a loaf of bread.’*

The first self about which to attain knowledge, is the secondary, essentially false, self which stands in the way, however useful it may be for many daily transactions. It must be set aside, made something which can be used or not used: not something which uses you. The way in which this is done is by self-observation: registering how and when this self is operating, and how it deceives. (33)

- o The secondary self is to be recognized, identified and then transmuted, rather than suppressed or distorted. “The conditioned or immature self tends to control the learner, and makes further progress impossible until it has been brought into subjection, set aside or transformed.”

What is today called conditioning is what used to be called habit-patterns based on lower objectives. The Sufi method has never been to disturb these patterns, but rather to supply or make possible the development of a superior consciousness which would be able to perceive the habit and regulate its value. Once a person can really experience the value or otherwise, the relevance or otherwise, of a conditioned form of behaviour or thought, he or she will inevitably modify it. This is what we call ‘polishing the mirror’ in one of its aspects. If you have a scowl on your face, and this scowl has become a habit, and you do not know about it, or do know and do not know how to remove it, you will be in a different state when you can see it in a mirror. Instantaneously or bit by bit the reflection will do its job: coupled with the other things which you ‘see in the mirror’ – for within is the vision of what you could be like, sensed in an interior fashion. (34)

- o When an individual develops insight into the workings of their personality they are more likely to interact with other people without automatically reacting to the egoistic and dysfunctional behaviour patterns of others.

Non-reaction to the ego of others is one of the most effective ways not only of going beyond ego in yourself but also of dissolving the collective human ego. But you can only be in a state of no-reaction if you can recognize someone's behaviour as coming from the ego, as being an expression of the collective human dysfunction. When you realize it's not personal, there is no longer a compulsion to react as if it were. By not reacting to the ego, you will often be able to bring out the sanity in others, which is the unconditioned consciousness as opposed to the conditioned. At times you may have to take practical steps to protect yourself from deeply unconscious people. This you can do without making them into enemies. Your greatest protection, however, is being conscious. Somebody becomes an enemy if you personalize the unconsciousness that is the ego. Non-reaction is not weakness but strength. Another word for non-reaction is forgiveness. To forgive is to overlook, or rather to look through. You look through the ego to the sanity that is in every human being as his or her essence. (35)

- o Certain types of conditioning are reasonable and natural as long as they are not reactive or a self-imposed conditioning. "What has to be done, as with any other input needed by the human being, is to regulate it (whether it be the desire for gain, the need to achieve) so that the necessary 'space' may be found."

We are a very adaptable animal and we can do many different things. We are emotional, we can paint, we have arguments, we think, we are sometimes rational – but learning how to develop consciousness does not necessarily entail giving up these aspects of our nature, but *organizing them*.

On this rests a fundamental insight of both modern and traditional psychologies, an insight that has not reached many of its students: our mental operating system is not one designed to act rationally in business, in our social and emotional life, so it does not allow us to simply "transcend" our material nature immediately; we must carry it along. We have many mental abilities, but they are basically designed for immediate survival in a chaotic world.

It is a matter of understanding *which* of our needs needs to be satisfied at any one time, and *which* of our mental routines is useful at any moment. Certainly no one needs give up those reactions useful to survival and the "normal" social conditioning that we need to get along in any society. *It is a matter of selecting and connecting them in the right way, each for the right kind of thinking.*

Our minds are multiple, and we find it difficult to control the diverse mental abilities within. This ability to choose and direct the mental system is the most often unrealized aim of 'conscious development.' (36)

- o Teachers in esoteric schools will divert students' lower aspirations (greed, vanity) away from the spiritual area "by encouraging their disciples to channel the Commanding Self's activities to any worthy worldly ambition: while continuing to study the Way in a modest and non-self-promoting way."

It is often written within esoteric traditions that one does not build up the “ego,” or self, nor does one destroy it, but merely keeps it out of the area of the particular teaching. This is often termed “alignment.” It allows a full expression of the ordinary self, of reason and emotion in ordinary life. Here, then, is one pragmatic reason for the traditional separation of portions of esoteric instruction and practice from the remainder of a person’s social, emotional and professional life, the need for an area of human development to be kept “sacred,” away from the reductionism of self-indulgence. This practice has been externally marked, in the past, by the designation of special “safe” places, cathedrals or temples; by the donning of special robes or hats or the like; and by such practices as leaving one’s shoes at the door of the temple. These practices are all intended to suggest that one should leave ordinary ideas and the ordinary self out of this situation. (37)

- o The very process of observing our habitual patterns of behaviour, when carried out in an objective, non-judgmental manner, will in itself modify and transform these patterns.

Act in daily life according to your understanding. This is very important. Take note afterwards whether you have acted in a mechanical way. After you have noticed several times that you have reacted in a certain way, you will begin to catch yourself in the middle of the reaction and a time will come, you can be sure, when you are alert before you react. So don’t qualify your doing or condemn yourself. It’s enough just to see it. When you’ve seen it you have taken the charcoal out of the fire. You have removed the fixed energy that holds your pattern. In simply being alert and welcoming, you are already living in your fullness. (38)

Examining Mental Assumptions and Patterns

*‘It is better to master the mind than be mastered by the mind.’
Zen saying*

- o Most people have little control over the stream of thoughts produced by their minds and by external impacts. “The constantly moving flow of thoughts in our mind, which we can neither stop nor control, take up an enormous amount of our energy.”
- o People need to realize that their minds have been implanted and ingrained with assumptions and preconceptions deeply rooted in our culture. “Clearing the mind of the dross of conditioning is essentially an operation of *unlearning*. Consciousness must be emptied of all the debris that impairs perception and cognition.” A classical Zen story illustrates this important principle:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era, received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured the visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself.

“It is overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?” (39)

- o Self-study involves becoming aware of perceptual sets, mental blocks, habits of thinking and assumptions. The initial step in higher development is to “become aware of automatic pattern-thinking, the conditioned associations and indoctrinated values that limit human perception and receptivity.”
- o A vital approach to self-knowledge is to question and examine one’s assumptions and expectations in a detached, non-compulsive manner. “Find out why you believe the things you do believe; examine the bases of your ideas.”

A sense of anti-climax is to be watched. It may frequently be caused by the desirable disappointment of an undesirable expectation.

You cannot be certain to be able to pin down the expectation which was incorrect, or even the assumptions which make you react in this manner. But you can observe yourself reacting in this way. This is an indispensable prerequisite for training to become really sensitive to essential impressions.

It is called ‘watching.’ (40)

- o It is important to distinguish areas in which habit and assumptions are useful or even essential and where they are unsuitable.

Study the assumptions behind your actions. Then study the assumptions behind your assumptions. “Why did I do such-and-such a thing?” is all very well. But what about “How otherwise could I have done it?” (41)

- o When faced with repetitive, deep-rooted thoughts it is important to neither indulge them, passively accept them or force them away – but simply let the emphasis go from the thought to observing it. “It is normal for the mind to produce thoughts. Be aware of your thoughts without getting lost in them. And if you get lost, notice that, too.”

Q: How can I free myself from the continual stream of agitated thoughts?

A: Simply observe their coming and going. Neither refuse them nor encourage them. In no way direct them. Remain impersonally alert. You will soon feel that thoughts, feelings and sensations appear in this directionless alertness, your openness. They exist only because you are, thus their appearing points to their homeground, the real you. At first you will find that you keep interfering with your thoughts, suppressing or being taken by them. You do this because of the insecurity felt by an ego about to die, an isolated ego. But when you are free from the mental habits of activity and passivity you will find yourself in your natural quiet attention.

Q: So this natural state of attention does not mean I must be completely free from all thoughts?

A: It is not dependent on the absence of thought. It is that in which thoughts appear and disappear. It is “behind” thought. So don’t be violent or brutal with yourself in the hope of freeing yourself from agitation, but be clear-headed. In simple openness which is welcoming you will come to accept and get to know your negative feelings, desires and fears. Once welcomed in non-directed attention these feelings will burn themselves up, leaving only silence. Be alert, ready for each and every appearing and you will soon find yourself the uninvolved spectator of your thoughts. Once this is an established fact, whether thoughts come to mind or not you will not be bound to them. (42)

- o Awareness illuminates the constant flow of thoughts that characterize our mental life. “We have to observe the mind and notice what it’s doing. We have to notice how the mind produces swarms of self-centered thoughts, thus creating tension in the body.”

All of us, without exception, have been thoroughly conditioned to react immediately to what is happening in and around us by thinking about it – talking to ourselves and to others in judgmental ways, often repeating these thoughts over and over again. Thoughts evoke emotions, tensions, excitement, and stress, and can bring on exhaustion and sickness. Awareness reveals this simply to be so.

Is it totally radical to just stop, look, listen, and experience what is actually taking place without immediately reacting with more thinking about it all? Can there be just a simple awareness, which means experiencing openly, innocently, this whole stream without getting caught up in thoughts about what is good, what could be better or perhaps worse?

Awareness is not progressive; it illuminates *what is* without a sense of time, without self-separation. (43)

- o When we observe thoughts without interference or evaluation, the thoughts slowly disappear as the witness state emerges and gains strength. “When you do not get involved with the thought process or the flow of words, or the flow of mind, you are not the mind.”

There must simply be a quiet looking at what composes the mind. In discovering the facts just as they are, agitation is eliminated, the movement of thoughts becomes slow and we can watch each thought, its cause and content as it occurs. We become aware of every thought in its completeness and in this totality there can be no conflict. Then only alertness remains, only silence in which there is neither observer nor observed. So do not force your mind. Just watch its various movements as you would look at flying birds. In this uncluttered looking, all your experiences surface and unfold. For unmotivated seeing not only generates tremendous energy but frees all tension, all the various layers of inhibitions. You see the whole of yourself.

Observing everything with full attention becomes a way of life, a return to your original and natural meditative being. (44)

- o The incessant chatter of the mind obscures our deeper self, conscious presence, our “natural state of felt oneness with Being.”

Q: What exactly do you mean by “watching the thinker?”

A: The beginning of freedom is the realization that you are not the possessing entity – the thinker. Knowing this enables you to observe the entity. The moment you start *watching the thinker*, a higher level of consciousness becomes activated. You then begin to realize that there is a vast realm of intelligence beyond thought, that thought is only a tiny aspect of that intelligence. You also realize that all the things that truly matter – beauty, love, creativity, joy, inner peace – arise from beyond the mind. You begin to awaken.

So when you listen to a thought, you are aware not only of the thought but also of yourself as the witness of the thought. A new dimension of consciousness has come in. As you listen to the thought, you feel a conscious presence – your deeper self – behind or underneath the thought, as it were. The thought then loses its power over you and quickly subsides, because you are no longer energizing the mind through identification with it. This is the beginning of the end of involuntary and compulsive thinking. (45)

Understanding Emotional Conditioning

*‘If you want to meet yourself, observe your thoughts
and reactions under unusual circumstances.’*

Adage

- o When people are conditioned or trained they will respond in a predictable way to emotional stimuli and input. “People will seek in greater quantity the things that touch them emotionally or which they like or are thrilled by. This is the barrier to surmount. It is crossed by observing it in action.”
- o Much of our conditioned behaviour is either a reaction to external sources or self-imposed. “When people are able to discern and understand their own emotional ebb and flow, they can operate it and not it them.”

The factors which apply during a person’s lifetime may and certainly do influence people’s reactions and feelings about certain things to a degree, if only because they develop a conditioned attitude or response towards these things. A certain amount of this conditioning is inevitable: it is imposed by social, religious, and other aspects of life. Again, a certain amount of this conditioning is perfectly valuable and reasonable. But some preoccupations, problems or neuroses can be traced back to negative conditioning which a person has received.

There is another form of conditioning to which a person is subject: and that is the conditioning which they impose upon themselves. One’s physical, emotional or psychic state of being is very much apt to be influenced by one’s experience, mood or reaction at a particular time, under particular circumstances. The being is so closely knit that it is easy for an inner impact of one kind or another to have a greater influence on one’s thinking, behaviour or reaction than another impact which comes from outside. (46)

- o Emotions are usually more difficult to observe than thoughts because of their energetic power. Most people become completely identified with strong emotions, making it difficult to observe them calmly and dispassionately.

An emotion usually represents an amplified and energized thought pattern, and because of its often overpowering energetic charge, it is not easy initially to stay present enough to be able to watch it. It wants to take you over, and it usually succeeds – unless there is enough presence in you. If you are pulled into unconscious identification with the emotion through lack of presence, which is normal, the emotion temporarily becomes “you.” Often a vicious circle builds up between your thinking and the emotion: they feed each other. The thought pattern creates a magnified reflection of itself in the form of an emotion, and the vibrational frequency of the emotion keeps feeding the original thought pattern. By dwelling mentally on the situation, event, or person that is the perceived cause of the emotion, the thought feeds energy to the emotion, which in turn energizes the thought pattern, and so on. (47)

- o Feelings and emotions are usually experienced as pleasant or unpleasant. Struggling with unpleasant emotions is an important method of self-observation and self-study.

In the sphere of the emotions it is very useful to try to struggle with the habit of giving immediate expression to all one’s unpleasant emotions. Many people find it very difficult to refrain from expressing their feelings about bad weather. It is still more difficult for people not to express unpleasant emotions when they feel that something or someone is violating what they may conceive to be order or justice. (48)

- o A great deal of energy is wasted unnecessarily on the expression of automatic and unpleasant emotions and in the habit of indulging in daydreams, memories and fantasies.

Energy is spent chiefly on unnecessary and unpleasant emotions, on the expectation of unpleasant things, possible and impossible, on bad moods, on unnecessary haste, nervousness, irritability, imagination, daydreaming and so on. Energy is wasted on perpetual chatter which absorbs an enormous amount of energy, on the ‘interest’ continually taken in things happening around us or to other people and having in fact no interest whatever. (49)

- o The ability to observe powerful emotions such as anger is very challenging but crucial in the work of self-transformation.

We can practice observing ourselves becoming angry: the arising thoughts, the bodily changes, the heat, the tension. Usually we don’t see what is happening because when we are angry, we are identified with our desire to be “right.” And to be honest, we aren’t even interested in practice. It’s very heavy to be angry. When the anger is major we find it hard to practice with it. A useful practice is to work with all the smaller angers that occur everyday. When we can practice with those as they occur, we learn; then when the bigger uproars come that ordinarily would sweep us away, we don’t get swept away so much. (50)

- o One of the most difficult tasks on the path of self-development is to overcome personal negative characteristics and endure the unpleasant manifestations of other people.

Q: I think that my worst fault is talking too much. Would trying not to talk so much be a good task?

A: For you this is a very good aim. You spoil everything with your talking. This talk even hinders your business. When you talk too much, your words have no weight. Try to overcome this. Many blessings will flow to you if you succeed. Truly, this is a very good task. But it is a big thing, not small.

Q: Would a good task be to endure the manifestations of others?

A: To endure the manifestations of others is a big thing. The last thing for a man. Only a perfect man can do this. Start by making your aim the ability to bear one manifestation of one person that you cannot now endure without nervousness. If you “wish,” you “can.” Without “wishing,” you never “can.” Wish is the most powerful thing in the world. With conscious wish everything comes. (51)

- o Awareness and attention are the means that transform negative emotions. “It isn’t important that we are upset; what is important is the ability to observe the upset.”

In clear, undivided attention, anger melts away – it loses its fuel and momentum. Its fuel and momentum are self-centered, dualistic thoughts, and the chain of reactions and counter-reactions they trigger throughout the organism.

When there is attention at the moment of provocation, then listening takes the place of habitual reaction. When images are clearly detected and understood, provocation loses its power to provoke.

Can you discover this for yourself? Not just words, not just anger, but the root source of it all?

This is the very essence of this work of looking into oneself wholly, honestly, openly, gently, beyond all words, explanations, and resolutions. (52)

- o When we are mindfully aware of our emotional states we create a space which prevents the complete identification with the emotion.

Q: How do we deal with anger, jealousy, hate, and so on?

A: They are all concepts. Once you understand the principle, you can transpose it to every dimension of life. When you feel anger, don’t judge it or name it. Make it an object of perception free from the interference of the intellect. Thoughts may come and go but if you give them no hold, you come to no conclusion. Sustain looking without conclusion and you’ll feel space between you and what you call anger. This space is not a psychological feeling but a genuine global body sensation. The more you become interested in the real anger, the more objective it becomes, a perception you observe rather than an emotivity you

are lost in. You will see it is only fixed energy with none of the qualities the mind calls anger.

Q: What if the emotion emerges suddenly and uncontrollably?

A: When the crisis is over you must recollect in tranquillity. Go back to the situation. Let it live again in your objective attention. (53)

Observing the Physical Body

o An important aspect of self-study is the observation of habits, postures and movements of the body.

Even at first attempt to study the elementary activity of the moving center a man comes up against habits. For instance, a man may want to study his movements, may want to observe how he walks. But he will never succeed in doing so for more than a moment if he continues to walk in the usual way. But if he understands that his usual way of walking consists of a number of habits, for instance, of taking steps of a certain length, walking at a certain speed, and so on, and he tries to alter them, that is, to walk faster or slower, to take bigger or smaller steps, he will be able to observe himself and to study his movements as he walks. If a man wants to observe himself when he is writing, he must take note of how he holds his pen and try to hold it in a different way from usual; observation will then become possible. In order to observe himself a man must try to walk not in his habitual way, he must sit in unaccustomed attitudes, he must stand when he is accustomed to sit, he must sit when he is accustomed to stand, and he must make with his left hand the movements he is accustomed to make with his right hand and vice versa. All this will enable him to observe himself and study the habits and associations of the moving center. (54)

o Study and observation of the physical body reveals areas of unnecessary tension which tend to deplete the system of energy and vitality.

There is the quite unnecessary constant tension of the *muscles* of our organism. The muscles are tense even when we are doing nothing. As soon as we start to do even a small and insignificant piece of work, a whole system of muscles necessary for the hardest and most strenuous work is immediately set in motion. We pick up a needle from the floor and we spend on this action as much energy as is needed to lift up a man of our own weight. We write a short letter and use as much muscular energy upon it as would suffice to write a bulky volume. But the chief point is that we spend muscular energy continually and at all times, even when we are doing nothing. When we walk the muscles of our shoulders and arms are tensed unnecessarily; when we sit the muscles of our legs, neck, back, and stomach are tensed in an unnecessary way. We even sleep with the muscles of our arms, of our legs, of our face, of the whole of our body tensed, and we do not realize that we spend much more energy on this continual readiness for work we shall never do than on all the real, useful work we do. (55)

- o Our physical body stores and reflects the experiences we undergo in life and can be restored to its natural state through awareness and silent observation. “The regeneration and purification of the body is obtained by establishing a discriminating attention which will dissolve and destroy all our set patterns.”

Your body is your vehicle, it's your tool. You need it for acting. You must explore it. In exploring it you will see it is conditioned through previous action, previous reactions. What we call our body is mainly only a field of reactions from previous situations, childhood and so on. So when you face your vehicle, your body, you will see that there are residues of resistance in it. Explore where the resistances are – emphasizing the accepting itself – and there comes a moment when you are free from this resistance and will use your body in a completely different way. We were often angry yesterday but today we are not angry, yet there are still residues of the anger very deep in the body. These residues form the muscle and nervous tensions in the body. Face these tensions directly without analyzing their origin.

Become acquainted with your body, first in non-action, lying down and sitting. See how the zones of which you are conscious appear to you. You will find many zones you are not aware of. So there comes a kind of palate of sensation, of feeling. Certain parts are completely light, transparent, others heavy and dense. Then in a certain way, you need to choose to emphasize the zones that are completely empty. Familiarize yourself with the empty feeling, then invade with the empty sensation, the other tense zones. In this way, you come to a kind of homogeneous feeling of your body. You first come to this feeling in a situation where there is no action, when lying down for example, then you can keep this homogeneous feeling, I would say this healthy feeling, in action. Whether it's the art of singing or walking, or playing music, or jogging or fighting, you have a relaxed unconditioned body ready for action. (56)

- o Most people identify with physical pain or fatigue. Simply observing the body without identification, judgment or the desire to escape or change transforms the physical state through pure awareness.

There are several ways one can deal with pain. Generally we tend to evade or direct it in some way, but then we are involved in it through an effort of will. When we simply observe and the pain is allowed to express itself, the energy fixed as pain becomes fluid. In pure looking there is nobody, no directing ego, and this energy, finding nowhere to localize, reintegrates with the whole.

It is important for you to learn how to live with pain. Never conceptualize it. I'll give you an example of what I mean. If you feel tired and tell yourself, “I'm tired,” you instantly identify with fatigue. This identification makes you an accomplice to this state, and thereby sustains it. But if you lie down and allow the fatigue its liberty to speak, it becomes an object of your observation. And as you are no longer an accomplice to it, the tired feeling quickly dissolves and you are completely refreshed. (57)

- o The food we eat has a profound effect on the body. Through open observation we begin to discriminate between foods which produce states of restlessness or heaviness and foods which lead to a relaxed, vital state of being.

Q: In many of the teachings of different traditions, we are encouraged to live with a certain amount of measure in our lives. For example, nothing in excess, the Middle Way, and so on. Or we are told to pursue a certain diet or way of life. What do you think about this?

A: On the physiological level, one could say you are what you absorb. As soon as you come more in contact with the workings and sensations of your body-mind, you will see how the things you absorb act on you. You will notice how what you take in, not only by the mouth but also through the skin, affects how you wake up in the morning. You will be interested in how the body appears to you before going to sleep at night, or after a nap in the afternoon. But all this calls for observation, not the concentration of a hunting dog, but a relaxed observation without any intention. Then, in this observation free from reaction, you will act intelligently. Where you feel a lack you will make an addition of certain elements, and where you feel a heaviness you will omit certain things, until you come to the organic body, where the expanded, light, energy body is freed. No system can bring you to know yourself in this way. Only reaction-free observation, seeing the facts as they are. (58)

- o The conditioned idea that “I am the body” and identification with physical sensations, memories and habits are superimpositions on the primal, natural state of the body.

The only way to become free from conditioning is to look without memory, without the accomplice to the conditioning. Let whatever feelings appear within you come up without visualizing or concentrating on them. In letting the feeling appear before the witness “I”, before attention without periphery or center, the body goes through several degrees of elimination, for all the superimposition dissolves before this witness. You will observe a letting go of the conditioning. The emphasis that was wrongly put on the conditioning so as to reassure the person, now switches to the observation, to the witnessing, and you will soon find yourself to be the light beyond the witnessed. This is your natural state of total expansion which is energy, open and light.

At first the new body sensation will be fragile and you may be solicited by the old patterns. But the body has an organic memory, a memory of its natural state of ease, which, once reawakened and sustained, will sooner or later become permanent. The old sensations will become foreign to you. You may even find it difficult to recall them. Then you will realize that the body appears in you, in awareness, and that you are not lost in the body. (59)

Sensing the Inner Self or Being

- o It is possible to contact, communicate and harmonize with one’s inner essential being, sometimes known as ‘listening to the inner voice.’

It is within himself that the seeker must seek for truth. It is his inner voice, his inner certainty, that he must, as it were, rediscover and cultivate. It is in these that the secret of his full humanity always lay, and these that reason and instinct have combined to distort. If his first task on setting out on the path is to discover, not what one learns, but how, then his best beginning is to become aware of his own reactions, listen to his inner voice, and in their light make the crucial choice of who is to guide him. (60)

- o Certain habits of mind mask the perception of deeper, subtle, inner communications. “The mind needs to be developed to perceive things which are subtle as well as those which are obvious and, in addition, to introduce entirely new concepts for the mind to work with.”

The student is encouraged to practice ‘listening’ to his intuitive sense in the attempt to perceive whether this or that word or action was indeed correct in a wider context. If he is, for instance, prompted to alternative action, he can evaluate its reliability by reviewing his day’s life in retrospect. The success of this monitoring will depend upon its frequency and honesty, but will be clouded if it becomes obsessional. (61)

- o When the surface mind is quiet and relaxed it becomes receptive to the perception of finer, more subtle states of consciousness and awareness.

To be, just *be*, is important. You need not ask anything, nor do anything. It means that for the time being you are free from the obsession with ‘what next.’ When you are not in a hurry and the mind is free from anxieties, it becomes quiet and in the silence something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception. The mind must be open and quiet to see. (62)

- o Many messages from the inner being are ignored or disregarded because the form or signal is not as expected. “When you are looking at or communicating with the deeper being, you should be conscious of the fact that your conditioned reaction to certain stimuli may be quite different to the reaction of your inner being.”

Nobody is closer to oneself than one’s own being. The being knows what is going on, knows what influences are impacting on a person. The being signals to a person and the signals are very often ignored because of conditioning. When people only consider themselves to be rational and intellectual beings, they will only assimilate properly rational persuasions. And of course everybody says, “No, I’m perfectly reasonable, I’m open to suggestions.”

Well, you are not open enough. The signals or feelings which come from the inner being are often ignored because they are not presented in a sophisticated enough way.

For instance, when they come from the inner sensing or inner hunger, and don’t exactly present themselves in the same way that the other senses do, they are ignored, even though they may be very obvious. (63)

- o One of the qualities of inner experience is the elasticity of time.

Time is a funny thing; it can be stretched, it can be compressed. The clock turns, the calendar changes, but I am not referring to that sort of time: I am talking about the interior time. Interior time can be stopped or stretched or compressed. It can be stretched or expanded in a situation which really requires more time. The human being is following our minute and day time factor; but inside that exterior time factor is the inner time factor. (64)

Preparation for Higher Development

'Prepare yourself and then learn.'
Saying

- o Becoming aware of oneself is regarded as vital as a preparation for the reception of higher knowledge. As an exercise it is sometimes called 'self-sensing' in esoteric schools, to be "carefully carried out under direction and never as a compulsion."
- o Transformation to a higher state of being and development begins with self-knowledge and an honest, impartial appraisal of the human condition.

The study of the laws to which man is subject cannot be abstract like the study of astronomy; they can be studied only by observing them in oneself and *getting free of them*. At the beginning a man must simply understand that he is quite needlessly subject to a thousand petty but irksome laws which have been created for him by other people and by himself. When he attempts to get free from them he will see that he cannot. Long and persistent attempts to gain freedom from them will convince him of his slavery. The laws to which man is subject can only be studied by struggling with them, by trying to get free from them. But a great deal of knowledge is needed in order to become free from one law without creating for oneself another in its place. (65)

- o One of the purposes of a preparatory activity like self-observation is to enable people to understand themselves and their motivations since people commonly try to run before they can walk. "The statement 'you need to do something else first' is very often taken by the *Commanding Self* as a rejection or as a challenge, instead of it being taken for what it really is, a constructive and well-meant description of the other person's current position and needs."
- o An individual engaged in a spiritual quest can, by means of self-questioning, learn to discriminate between the fulfillment of lower socio-psychological needs and higher spiritual aims. *'The subjective self must first be prepared – then objective assessment is possible.'*

The concept that anyone can embark on any kind of enquiry or study, irrespective of ability or preparation, has the solitary but not negligible defect that it simply does not work. This is particularly true in the case of the human mind trying to work with the human mind. The Sufi conception of *Nafs-i-Ammara* – the lower,

‘Commanding Self’ which ‘veils’ the ability to discern Reality – insists that anyone who tries to move ahead with spiritual activity without transforming this Self will destroy his gains. (66)

- o Would-be students of higher teaching must ‘sort themselves out’ by examining themselves to see if their attempts at metaphysical study are really only used to fulfill lesser social or psychological desires. “It is the true discrimination between diversion and genuine aspiration which generally precedes the emergence of the capacity to learn.”

In respect to higher teaching, the individual has to learn the difference between ‘wants’ and needs.’ He can learn this only after basic teaching. When a child says that it needs something, it often means, until it understands the difference, that it ‘wants’ that thing. ‘I need a lollipop’ does not describe the situation at all. Only experience will show the difference between wants and needs. (67)

- o The process of self-examination precedes the stage at which the student can understand the corrective admonitions of a teacher. According to Saadi: ‘If you will not reprove yourself, you will not welcome reproof from another.’

Until you can see yourself clearly and constantly for what you are really like, you will have to rely upon the assessment of a teacher: the ‘gardener of Rumi’s comparison:

‘A gardener going into an orchard looks at the trees. He knows that this one is a date, that one a fig, the other a pomegranate, a pear or an apple. To do this, he does not have to see the fruit, only the trees.’ (68)

- o One of the teacher’s duties is to supply the appropriate training to ‘polish’ and complete various facets of the student’s personality.

The teacher’s early function must be to alter the pattern of the novice’s thinking and thus of his behaviour. If the novice’s mind operates in a set way, dominated by prejudices and automatic responses of which he may not even be conscious, it interposes itself as a barrier between himself and the fact of the teacher, the activity of the teaching. In order for mind, intelligence, to become a channel for the teaching, it must be made aware, so it can seize on the multiplicity of truth and snap up the complexities of meaning.

If the disciple follows his teacher’s instructions, picks up his hints, reacts to the stimuli he provides, strange though these may be and tending in directions he cannot guess at, the aspirant will surely begin to break through the mental barriers, the rigidities, blocks and distortions, that previously hampered him and prevented his progress. (69)

- o Self-knowledge is a graduated process, difficult at the beginning, but slowly leading to an understanding of the deeper self.

Self-observation is very difficult. The more you try, the more clearly you will see this. At present you should practice it not for results but to understand that

you cannot observe yourselves. In the past you imagined that you saw and knew yourselves. I am speaking of objective self-observation. Objectively you cannot see yourselves for a single minute, because it is a different function, the function of the master.

If it seems to you that you can observe yourselves for five minutes, this is wrong; if it is for twenty minutes or for one minute – it is equally wrong. If you simply realize that you cannot, it will be right. To come to it is your aim. To achieve this aim, you must try and try.

When you try, the result will not be, in the true sense, self-observation. But trying will strengthen your attention, you will learn to concentrate better. All this will be useful later. Only then can one begin to remember oneself. (70)

- o The initial stages of breaking down long-established modes of thinking and patterns of behaviour may at first appear threatening and even destructive. *'Unless you are first disintegrated how can you be reintergrated?'*

By being forced to re-examine his values, his conceptions and perceptions of the world, the whole system of ideas that hitherto he has accepted as self-evident, the novice is levered out of his previous emotional and intellectual environment. It may have been one in which he felt secure, but that very security encouraged in him precisely the kind of automatic thinking and behaviour that made any new self-knowledge impossible. By learning to question, at deeper and deeper levels the reasons for the actions he performs: and thus to understand what truly motivates him, who he really is, the disciple is slowly detached from the pointless, the uncreative or unworthy activities in which he may previously spent much of his time. The process is slow, step by step, action by action, insight by insight, as the aspirant makes his way forward. This cleansing process, as it might be called, is itself no more than a beginning, though it may take many years. (71)

- o With self-knowledge a foundation of right orientation and discrimination begins to operate in the individual who embarks on the quest for mystical experience. “The seeker of transcendental states of mind may all too easily forget that their true attainment begins with the most profoundly mundane kinds of self-knowledge.”
- o The dangers of grafting spiritual practices upon a raw unregenerate personality is illustrated by the story of the ‘Cannibals and the Missionary.’

A missionary who had been captured by cannibals was sitting in a cooking-pot of rapidly heating water when he saw the cannibals with their hands clasped in prayer. He said to the nearest one: “So you are devout Christians?”

“Not only am I a Christian,” replied the annoyed cannibal, “but I strongly object to being interrupted while saying grace!”

The carrying on of automatic habits, of intellectual sophistries without a change in the person, or of emotional activities without deep perception acting upon the real self, cannot ever be the same as the experience of the mystic.

If this tale is taken for a parable of trying to make someone rise to a higher state without transforming his lower aspects, it can also serve as a classical instance of

the argument that human beings must clarify their personalities before they can attain certain desired levels. Let us call it the 'incompatibility of co-existent tendencies in the individual.' (72)

Importance of Self-Observation in Esoteric Schools

*'To whomever has sense, a sign is enough.
For the heedless, a thousand expositions are not enough.'*
Saying

- o An esoteric school, in the form of a teacher and a group, is a technical instrument designed to provide a bridge between an individual or group and a higher order of knowledge. "The function of the Teaching is to exist among people and reawaken in them the capacity to spiritually develop themselves."
- o The methods applied in an esoteric school are subjective, taking into account the individual characteristics and peculiarities of each student.

In the Institute our weaknesses were observed and noted, and we were given opportunities of seeing them; and we had to see them for ourselves. Attention was necessary so as not to miss anything that was said or done. Apparently casual remarks or actions might reveal a great deal to a person. The teaching was given in fragments and often in unexpected ways, and we had to learn to put the pieces together and connect the fragments up with our own observations and experiences. (73)

- o A teacher will often point out examples of inappropriate individual and group behaviour that disturbs the higher learning process.

Although maladaptive behaviour abounds – narrow-mindedness, poor understanding, lack of generosity to others outside the 'in-group', few people, it seems, realize that it is so widespread. Fewer still have bothered to see it as a matter of study. And yet fewer seem to imagine, when you mention it to them, that it is avoidable by planning. At the best, in my experience, such people merely assume that it cannot happen to them.

And yet, by not looking at it, how many opportunities of learning about this thing are missed! If people won't look, merely telling them that something is there will not suffice. The purpose of talking about it, then, is not to add to their stock of formal information on the subject: it is rather to stimulate curiosity among whoever hears or reads, so that he may make this a verified part of his own experience. Experience teaches. (74)

- o A teacher may apply indirect and subtle methods to modify the student's negative characteristics. 'What you like most may be what you need least, and what you least like may well be exactly what you need the most.'

Vanity and self-love, together with ingrained biases, are deplored in all spiritual persuasions. With the Sufis, these elements are held to harm the individual and the group by 'veiling' new knowledge and taking up energy to maintain them. Recrimination and self-criticism are not used; but people are expected to note the effects of allusions to their 'hang-ups', so as to be able to dissolve them and hence gain access to their inner selves.

The Sufi may, as has often been observed, work on the negativity and vanity of his audience, whether in lectures or in books, almost as a physiotherapist presses on the adhesions of a muscle, letting the knot be felt. One part of the procedure is to 'press the knot'. The other is the equivalent of the patient's doing his own part, his exercises. The basic exercise is to detach from the 'knot.' (75)

- o Students in esoteric schools are provided opportunities to understand and clarify their (often unconscious) motives and intentions.

The only remedy to mechanical, conditioned behaviour is to see that this is what you are doing, where you really are. Because people are not always in a condition to come to this realization by an act of will, traditional psychologies provide methods and materials in which there is the possibility of seeing oneself as one really is. The opportunity occurs again and again, through the nature of such a curriculum, and it takes many forms. (76)

- o Many exercises and study themes are designed to outwit the false self, which only thrives on smaller satisfactions. "The door of illumination is open to those for whom other doors are closed."

It is possible to turn away from automatism by using techniques devised to out-manoeuvre it. But first we must register sufficiently deeply, not just frequently or excitedly, that such a process is needed. Second, we must discover whether the individual involved has the capacity to be deautomatized. Third, we must prescribe the treatment for that particular individual. Fourth, we must assess whether he will abide by the treatment.

These are among the reasons for the techniques and specialized studies of the real Sufi school.

Some people are inwardly determined to retain their automatism while trying to profit from a Sufi school's work.

The automatism of man is overcome, in the words of Dhun'Nun, by aiming for 'being as you were, where you were, before you were.' (77)

- o Meditation is a central practice in many spiritual traditions. Students are instructed to observe thoughts as they arise in meditation and gently let them go by returning to the present moment.

Q: Would you expand upon the idea of letting go of thoughts that occur during meditation?

A: The best way to let go is to notice the thoughts as they come up and to acknowledge them. "Oh, yes, I'm doing that one again" – and without judging, return to the clear experience of the present moment. Just be patient. We might

have to do it ten thousand times, but the value for our practice is the constant return of the mind into the present, over and over and over. Don't look for some wonderful place where thoughts won't occur. Since the thoughts basically are not real, at some point they get dimmer and less imperative and we find there are periods when they tend to fade out because we see they are not real. They will just wither away in time without our quite knowing how it happened. (78)

- o Some exercises are designed to instruct students how to observe situations more closely and avoid assumptions and preconceptions. Two exercises in self-examination that are used in esoteric schools to advance a student's self-awareness are reviewing the day and journal writing.

The student is encouraged to practice 'listening' to his intuitive sense in the attempt to perceive whether this or that word or action was indeed correct in a wider context. If he is, for instance, prompted to alternative action, he can evaluate its reliability by reviewing his day's life in retrospect. The success of this monitoring will depend upon its frequency and honesty, but will be clouded if it becomes obsessional. (79)

Keep a journal. Write daily about the things that happen to you or strike you as significant. Start studying it after a lapse of time and see how your behaviour was partly due to a desire for self-inflation. Also try to see what useful or interesting concomitants there were to each event. (80)

- o Teaching stories are used to illustrate, at one step removed, egocentric thinking of which we may be oblivious. One of the purposes of teaching stories and tales is to enable the student to perceive the workings of the secondary self in themselves. "The major purpose is to 'freeze' this behaviour-pattern, first in examples and then in personal life, so as to perceive it and to avoid it".
- o Illustrative stories are employed to indicate barriers to learning, such as assumptions and preconceived attitudes. "The important thing is to be able to recognize what should be done and where and when it is indicated: not just to allow oneself to be pulled along by convention or other people's assumptions."

The story of the 'real and artificial flowers', in one of its interpretations, shows the way to rethink a situation, and also how to put it into its proper area, and not to imagine that because people say that something is, say, spiritual, that it must therefore be so.

Someone went to the public session of a wise man, with two bunches of flowers. He said:

'One of these bunches is of real flowers; the other, made with the greatest cunning in China, is artificial. If you are as perceptive as you are supposed to be, I would like you to tell me which is which. But you must not hold them very close, you must not smell or touch them.'

The sage said: 'A wise question is met with a wise answer, a shallow one with a shallow reply. This, however, is a horticultural one – bring a hive of bees!'

The bees, of course, chose the real flowers. (81)

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