

SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

'Without self-knowledge, without understanding the workings and functions of our being, we cannot be free. That 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'

The journey of spiritual development and self-realization begins with self-study. Self-study leads to self-knowledge and eventually to an understanding of the meaning and purpose of existence. The words of Socrates and many others – '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)

To understand ourselves we need to investigate our body and mind through direct experience. "You are always changing, you are never the same and each moment reveals a new facet, a new depth, a new surface."

The only way to experience truth directly is to look within, to observe oneself. All our lives we have been accustomed to look outward. We have always been interested in what is happening outside, what others are doing. We have rarely if ever tried to examine ourselves, our own mental and physical structure, our own actions, our own reality. Therefore we remain unknown to ourselves. We do not realize how harmful this ignorance is, how much we remain the slaves of forces within ourselves of which we are unaware. The inner darkness must be dispelled to apprehend the truth. We must gain insight into our own nature in order to understand the nature of existence. The entire universe and the laws

of nature by which it works are to be experienced within oneself. They can *only* be experienced within oneself. The path is also a path of purification. We investigate the truth about ourselves not out of idle intellectual curiosity but rather with a definite purpose. By observing ourselves we become aware for the first time of the conditioned reactions, the prejudices that cloud our mental vision, that hide reality from us and produce suffering. We recognize the accumulated inner tensions that keep us agitated, miserable, and we realize that they can be removed. Gradually we learn how to allow them to dissolve, and our minds become pure, peaceful, and happy. (2)

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 of 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. (3)

In order to nurture and develop self-understanding we need to get to know ourselves as we really are: our minds, our emotions, our behaviour and our being. "We think we know ourselves, but actually we don't. There are all sorts of undiscovered areas of our thoughts and actions. What we find in ourselves might be quite astonishing."

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."

Our reactions to the situations of everyday living 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 immediate and clear insight can the mind begin to free itself from its conditioning, opening up to the depth of understanding that is compassion. (4)

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 might be'."

Self-knowledge grows as we objectively explore the nature of body, mind and feelings in a detached, non-judgemental manner. "Self-knowledge is an aim, but it is also a means. Self-knowledge is a means of deeper 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 in 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. (5)

Before there can be intelligent action there must be self-knowledge. Krishnamurti stressed this idea in his teachings: "There is no understanding without self-knowing; learning about the self is not accumulating knowledge about it; gathering of knowledge prevents learning; learning is not an additive process; learning is from moment to moment, as is understanding."

Ignorance is not the lack of knowledge but of self-knowing; without self-knowing there is no intelligence. Self-knowing is not accumulative as knowledge; learning is from moment to moment. It is not an additive process; in the process of gathering, adding, a center is formed, a center of knowledge, of experience. In this process, positive or negative, there is no understanding; for as long as there is an intention of gathering or resisting, the movement of thought and feeling are not understood, there is no self-knowing. Without self-knowing there's no intelligence. Self-knowing is active present, not a judgment; all self-judgment implies an accumulation, evaluation from a center of experience and knowledge. It is this

past that prevents the understanding of the active present. In the pursuit of self-knowing there is intelligence. (6)

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:

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. (7)

Approach to Self-Study

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

In authentic spiritual teachings emphasis is placed on monitoring one's behaviour and learning about oneself in an honest and non-judgemental way – self-observation without neurotic self-abasement. "Become curious about the true nature of yourself, about what you really are, because that curiosity opens you up to the undivided state. From the undivided state, one of the first things realized is that you don't really know who you are."

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 approach in measuring or criticizing yourself as you would in the case of a very dear cherished friend. (8)

Self-study is a conscious effort which begins with the development and control of attention. "Simultaneously and progressively, we will feel that the first phase of study puts us in touch with work on our attention, which will become the central axis of new inner experiences."

With self-study it is important to be impartial and not to expect any quick results. "What is crucial is to see oneself, to observe one's mechanical, automatic, reactionary behaviour without comment, and without making any attempt initially to change that behaviour."

Self-examination should be an objective, non-judgemental 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 labelled. 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. (9)

Self-knowledge is a lifetime commitment of study and work, in which one gradually builds up a picture of oneself. “Increase of self-knowledge and change of the level of being happens of itself simply by again and again bringing the light of our attention and intelligence to what we have been blind to.” The significance of persistence in this effort of self-knowing is encapsulated in a saying of Saadi: *‘Not every oyster holds a pearl; not every time does the archer hit his target.’*”

With continued practice the very act of studying and observing ourselves, honestly and without judgement, dissolves the personality and ego structures which block higher development and being. “The pure act of seeing a fact, whatever the fact may be, brings its own understanding and from this, mutation takes place.”

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 about whatever appears. (10)

Self-knowledge is an inner experiential understanding of ourselves as human beings rather than an analytical or intellectual understanding:

Self-knowledge has from the beginning of time been fundamental in many doctrines and many schools. Not an exterior analytical knowledge, such as modern western science has been pursuing for so long, avoiding all the inner questions or trying to reduce them to purely materialistic explanations, but rather an inner self-knowledge wherein, to avoid distortion, each element, each structure, each function, as well as their relationships and the laws which govern them, are not looked at only from the outside, but must be experienced in the whole context to which they belong and can only be truly known “at work” in their totality.

This is a completely different attitude from that which modern science has accustomed us to, and the one does not exclude the other. But, for our possibility of inner evolution, one thing must be clear. What is required is not intellectual knowledge, which, properly speaking, is mere information. Such information may be necessary, but is absolutely inadequate in our search. For this search, the self-knowledge we need is above all an inner experience, consciously lived, of what we are, including the whole range of impressions of oneself which one receives. (11)

Great stress is placed on sincerity in the process of self-study. "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. (12)

Self-understanding arises when we objectively observe the reality or facts of our life as they happen. "Learning about yourself is never the same as accumulating knowledge about yourself. Learning is active present and knowledge is the past. Knowing, learning about yourself has no beginning and no end, whereas knowledge has. Knowledge is finite, and learning, knowing, is infinite."

There are only facts, not greater or lesser facts. The fact, the what is, cannot be understood when approached with opinions or judgments; opinions, judgments then become the facts and not the fact that you wish to understand. In pursuing the fact, in watching the fact, the what is, the fact teaches and its teaching is never mechanical, and to follow its teachings, the listening, the observation must be acute; this attention is denied if there is a motive for listening . . . There is no system or method which will give understanding but only a choiceless awareness of a fact. Meditation according to a system is the avoidance of the fact of what you are; it is far more important to understand yourself, the constant changing of the facts about yourself, than to meditate in order to find god, have visions, sensations and other forms of entertainment. (13)

An important aspect of self-knowledge 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.*'

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.*' (14)

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. (15)

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

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 change all you are doing is shifting energy around a little and making things momentarily more comfort-

able for yourself. In the attitude of openness and exploration you automatically become silent. (16).

Studying the ‘Secondary Self’ or ‘False Personality’

The ‘secondary self’ or ‘commanding self’ is described by the Sufis as a complex of reactions and self-imposed barriers erected by the ‘lower understanding.’ This false personality is the superficial (though necessary) intellectual-emotional system which hides or ‘veils’ the essence or deeper individuality of the human being. In a conversation with his students Gurdjieff described the mechanical nature of this conditioned self:

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 influence 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 one 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 understand 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. (17)

Self-deception and bias, two characteristics of the secondary self, prevent real knowledge and understanding. “The Sufi conception of 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 Sufi ancient Junaid of Baghdad alluded to the distorting operation of the secondary self in this observation: “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.”

The reactive patterns of the secondary self have their source in unconscious childhood conditioning by parents and the surrounding culture, and continue to be shaped and strengthened as we grow older:

Reactions are patterns of emotions and behaviours, formed by conditioning, that run automatically when they are triggered by internal or external events. They are the cumulative result of a complex interaction among emotions, behaviours, and perception. Significant sources of conditioning include the needs of the body and the basic human need for love, affection, and other forms of attention. We can add family history and values, childhood and adult experience, and social and cultural influences. Reactive patterns also develop from biological propensities and such evolutionary traits as the flight-or-fight response . . . Think of reactive patterns as mechanisms. They are pre-established by conditioning, are triggered by external and internal events, and, once triggered, run only according to what has been conditioned. Such mechanisms may appear to be aware or responsive, but they are no more responsive than a computer program. (18)

One important method of self-study, leading to the diminution of the secondary self, is to oppose habits for the purpose of self-knowledge and inner development:

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. 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. 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. (19)

Understanding the nature of the secondary 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 and methods 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. (20)

The habitual conditioned patterns which underlie the structure of the personality must be directly seen and acknowledged before they can be transformed. "We end suffering by ceasing

to identify with what we are not: a pattern that interprets experience as separate and other and then operates to control or justify its own imagined existence.”

To wake up is hard. We must first realize that we are asleep. Next, we need to identify what keeps us asleep, start to take it apart, and keep working at dismantling it until it no longer functions. As soon as we make an effort to wake up, we start opening up to how things are. We experience what we have suppressed or avoided and what we have ignored or overlooked. When this happens, the reactive patterns that have run our lives, kept us in confusion, distorted our feelings, and caused us to ignore what is right in front of us are triggered. They rise up strongly to undermine the attention that is bringing us into a deeper relationship with what we are and what we experience. When we can see those patterns and everything that is constructed out of them as the movement of mind and nothing else, we begin to wake up. (21)

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 to 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 thought 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. (22)

By examining 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. (23)

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 changes but this witness never changes. So the real question is, "How can I become acquainted with the witness?" (24)

Examining Mental and Emotional Patterns

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." There is a Zen saying: *'It is better to master the mind than be mastered by the mind.'*

We need to realize that our 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 classic Zen story illustrates this 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 could no longer 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?" (25)

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.” It is important to distinguish areas in which habits 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?’”

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 for. 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 assumption which makes 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.’ (26)

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 home-ground, 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 dependant 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. (27)

Awareness illuminates the constant flow of thoughts that characterize our mental life. “We have to observe the mind and notice what it is 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 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. (28)

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.” Much of our behaviour is either a reaction to external influences or a self-imposed conditioning. “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.”

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 study 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. (29)

Feelings and emotions are usually expressed as pleasant or unpleasant. Struggling with an unpleasant emotion is an important method of self-observation and self-study. There is an adage: *'If you want to meet yourself, observe your thoughts and reactions under unusual circumstances.'*

In the sphere of the emotions it is very useful to try to struggle with the habit of giving immediate expression to all of 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. (30)

A good deal of energy is unnecessarily wasted 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. (31)

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. (32)

Transcending Conditioned Behaviour

The impulses, emotional fixations and mental attitudes that characterize the secondary self have to be seen for what they are and treated accordingly. A saying of Rumi applies to this situation: *'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)

The secondary self needs 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)

When individuals develop insight into the workings of their false personality they are more likely to interact with other people without automatically reacting to the egoistic and dysfunctional behaviour patterns of others. We then have the opportunity of not always responding to life events based on past conditioned patterns: "A person attacks you verbally, but instead of reacting to the insults, you see how upset and angry the person is, and you respond appropriately, perhaps by simply asking what is upsetting them."

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 non-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)

Certain types of conditioning are useful and natural as long as they are not reactive or the result of a pattern of 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 to 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 of all 'conscious development.' (36)

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. (37)

Self-Study in Esoteric Schools

An esoteric school, in the form of a teacher and a group, is an instrument of 'skilful means' 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." The methods applied in an esoteric school are subjective, taking into account the individual characteristics and peculiarities of each student. There is a saying: *'To whomever has sense, a sign is enough. For the heedless, a thousand expositions are not enough.'*

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, as we had to learn to put the pieces together and connect the fragments up with our own observations and experiences. (38)

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." A teacher may apply indirect and subtle methods to modify the student's negative characteristics, following the dictum *'what you like most may be what you need least, and what you least like may well be exactly what you need the most.'*

In esoteric schools, a teacher 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. (39)

Students in esoteric schools are provided opportunities to understand and clarify their (often unconscious) motives and intentions. “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 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. (40)

Many exercises and study themes are designed to outwit the secondary self, which only thrives on smaller satisfactions. The wise have rightly taught: *‘The door of illumination is open to those for whom other doors are closed.’* The automatism of the normal human being is overcome, in the words of the Egyptian Sufi Dhun`Nun, by aiming for “being as you were, where you were, before you were.”

Illustrative stories are employed in schools of higher development 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 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. (41)

Preparation for Higher Development

Transformation to a higher state of being and development begins with self-knowledge and an honest, impartial appraisal of our human situation. Gurdjieff spoke of this in stark terms:

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 need in order to become free from one law without creating for oneself another in its place. (42)

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.” Most individuals resist attempts to objectively describe their current spiritual situation: “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.” 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 out 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.’ (43)

With the dawn of 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.”

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; only then is objective assessment 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."

Would-be students of higher teachings must "sort themselves out" by examining themselves to see if their attempts at metaphysical study are really only used to fulfil 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. (44)

The process of self-examination precedes the stage at which the student can understand the corrective admonitions of a teacher. According to the Sufi 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." (45)

Self-knowledge is a graduated process, difficult at the beginning, but slowly leading to an understanding of the deeper self. 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. (46)

The initial stages of breaking down long-established modes of thinking and patterns of behaviour may at first appear threatening and even destructive. In the Teaching it is said: 'Unless you are at first disintegrated, how can you be reintegrated?'

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 encourages 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 reason 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. (47)

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