

## THE HUMAN CONDITION

*'Humanity is asleep, concerned only with  
what is useless, living in a wrong world.'*

*Sanai*

### Humanity is Asleep

Human beings are described by many spiritual traditions as 'blind' or 'asleep' or 'in a dream.' These terms refer to the limited attenuated state of consciousness of most human beings caught up in patterns of conditioned thought, feeling and perception, which prevent the development of our latent, higher spiritual possibilities. In the words of Idries Shah: "Man, like a sleepwalker who suddenly 'comes to' on some lonely road has in general no correct idea as to his origins or his destiny." In some religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, the myth of the 'Fall from the Garden of Eden' symbolizes the loss of the primordial state through the veiling of higher consciousness. Other traditions use similar metaphors to describe the spiritual condition of humanity:

The Sufis characterize ordinary consciousness as a state of "deep sleep" or "blindness" – an overconcern with the irrelevant dimensions of the world. Gurdjieff's image is that man places shock absorbers between himself and the world. "We must destroy our buffers; children have none, therefore we must become like little children." In Indian thought, personal consciousness is compared to a "drunken monkey" living solely in his constructs – the world of "illusion." This same thought is a metaphorical meaning of the "fall" of man in the Christian tradition. (1)

The state of 'waking sleep' has been likened to a form of hypnosis induced by our family, culture and other external forces and influences. "We do not perceive ourselves and the world about us as they are but as we have been persuaded to perceive them."

As he is organized, that is, being such as nature has created him, man can be a self-conscious being. Such he is created and such he is born. But he is born among sleeping people, and, of course, he falls asleep among them just at the very time when he should have begun to be conscious of himself. Everything has a hand in this: the involuntary imitation of older people on the part of the child, voluntary and involuntary suggestion, and what is called 'education.' Every attempt to awaken on the child's part is instantly stopped. This is inevitable. And a great many efforts and a great deal of help are necessary in order to awaken later when thousands of sleep-compelling habits have been accumulated. And this very seldom happens. In most cases, a man when still a child already loses the possibility of awakening; he lives in sleep all his life and he dies in sleep. Furthermore, many people die long before their physical death. (2)

The normal waking state of an ordinary human being is completely subjective, conditioned and based on imagination, largely devoid of higher awareness and insight. As Gurdjieff so forcefully stated: “He cannot stop the flow of his thoughts, he cannot control his imagination, his emotions, his attention. He lives in a subjective world of ‘I love,’ ‘I do not love,’ ‘I like,’ ‘I do not like,’ ‘I want,’ ‘I do not want.’ He does not see the real world [which] is hidden from him by the wall of imagination. *He lives in sleep.*”

Buddhist teachings consider suffering and the unsatisfactory condition of ordinary life as the ‘First Noble Truth’ and point to the imperfections of the human mind as the root cause:

The Buddha taught that this life is an ocean of suffering. Everything is impermanent, so everything is always changing, changing, changing. Because we attach to things, we constantly suffer, since despite however much we love things they must always change and disappear and return to emptiness . . . this suffering is made entirely by our minds and it can be taken away the very moment we gain true insight into the nature of our mind. (3)

In most human beings suffering and happiness alternate in response to the play of external conditions and circumstances. But when there is an inner freedom from outer events and circumstances this reactive state drops away:

You have not seen how painful the life you live is. You are like a child sleeping with a lollipop in its mouth. You may feel happy for a moment by being totally self-centered, but it is enough to have a good look at human faces to perceive the universality of suffering. Even your own happiness is so vulnerable and short-lived, at the mercy of a bank-crash, or a stomach ulcer. It is just a moment of respite, a mere gap between two sorrows. Real happiness is not vulnerable because it does not depend on circumstances. Look at yourself fearlessly and you will at once realize that your happiness depends on conditions and circumstances, hence it is momentary, not real. Real happiness flows from within. (4)

Much of the pain and suffering experienced by human beings is self-created through resisting the natural flow of life:

Q: Nobody’s life is entirely free of pain and sorrow. Isn’t it a question of learning to live with them rather than trying to avoid them?

A: The greater part of human pain is unnecessary. It is self-created as long as the unobserved mind runs your life. The pain that you create is always some form of non-acceptance, some form of unconscious resistance to what *is*. On the level of thought, the resistance is some form of judgment. On the emotional level, it is some form of negativity. The intensity of the pain depends on the degree of resistance to the present moment, and this in turn depends on how strongly you are identified with your mind. The mind always seeks to deny

the Now and to escape from it. In other words, the more you are identified with your mind, the more you suffer. Or you may put it like this: the more you are able to honor and accept the Now, the more you are free of pain, of suffering – and free of the egoic mind. (5)

The outer events of the world are a reflection of the inner condition of humanity. Change must come from within not from without:

Q: Are you not at all concerned about the state of the world?

A: I am reading newspapers. I know what is going on! But my reaction is not like yours. You are looking for a cure, while I am concerned with prevention. As long as there are causes, there must also be results. As long as people are bent on dividing and separating, as long as they are selfish and aggressive, such things will happen. If you want peace and harmony in the world, you must have peace and harmony in your hearts and minds. Such change cannot be imposed; it must come from within. Those who abhor war must get war out of their own system. Without peaceful people how can you have peace in the world? As long as people are as they are, the world must be as it is. (6)

Gurdjieff related an Eastern teaching story known as “The Magician and the Sheep” that suggests that human beings are hypnotized into a state of ‘sleep’ which prevents them from seeing their true condition:

There is an Eastern tale which speaks about a very rich magician who had a great many sheep. But at the same time this magician was very mean. He did not want to hire shepherds, nor did he want to create a fence about the pasture where his sheep were grazing. The sheep consequently often wandered into the forest, fell into ravines, and so on, and above all they ran away, for they knew that the magician wanted their flesh and skins and this they did not like. At last the magician found a remedy. He *hypnotized* his sheep and suggested to them first of all that they were immortal and that no harm was being done to them when they were skinned, that, on the contrary, it would be very good for them and even pleasant; secondly he suggested that the magician was a *good master* who loved his flock so much that he was ready to do anything in the world for them; and in the third place he suggested to them that if anything at all were going to happen to them it was not going to happen just then, at any rate not that day, and *therefore* they had no need to think about it. Further the magician suggested to his sheep that they were not sheep at all; to some of them he suggested that they were *lions*, to others that they were *eagles*, to others that they were *men*, and to others that they were *magicians*. And after this all his cares and worries about the sheep came to an end. They never ran away again but quietly awaited the time when the magician would require their flesh and skins. This tale is a very good illustration of man’s position. (7)

## The Heritage of Human Evolution

The human animal, unlike other creatures, is estranged from his or her natural being and essential nature. The great classical Sufi sage Al-Ghazalli stated: *“Man has been created with animal qualities as well as angelic qualities; the latter constitute his real essence, while the former are merely accidental and transitory.”*

Human beings think that human beings are very clever animals. But despite all their intelligence, if you look closely at what has happened in the world you would see that human beings are actually the stupidest animals, because human beings don't understand human beings. A dog understands what a dog should do, and cats understand what cats should do. All animals understand their job and only do it. But we don't understand our correct job and correct way in this world, and instead we live only for ourselves. (8)

The structure and evolution of the human brain suggest that the modern neo-cortex and the more primitive regions of the brain have a strangely antagonistic, yet complementary, relationship:

Living an uneasy coexistence within us are our older emotional nature, dating back to the origin of our species and our cognitive or rational nature with its relatively new neo-cortex (only about five hundred thousand years old, some neurologists say). Our unfinished business, then, is to reconcile and harmonize our emotional and intellectual sides. (9)

A great deal of the social and interpersonal behaviour of human beings is rooted in the more primitive animal level of behaviour, and can only be understood from that perspective. For example, human beings resemble animals in being drawn to those aspects of things which immediately attract them, whether these things are suitable for them or not.

This parallel of unregenerate man as largely animal, endowed with faculties which he cannot yet properly use, is frequent in Sufi teaching: “The more animal the man, the less he understands of teachership. To him the guide may seem like the hunter, requiring him to enter a cage. “I was like this,” states Aali-Pir. “The untrained hawk thinks that if he is captured, as he calls it, he will be enslaved. He does not realize that the hawk-master will give him a fuller life, perched freely on the wrist of the King, without the perpetual preoccupation of food and fear.” (10)

Human ignorance, foolishness and outright stupidity are reflected in a wide variety of individual, group and cultural behaviour whose roots are pre-human rather than human. An analogy is the observed fact that many grown adults behave as though they were infants or children:

Many problems arise in current cultures because numerous adults behave like infants, while it is part of the convention to treat such behaviour as that of adults. But parents would not allow it in their own children. These people are still educable, even though their education might have to be similar to that given to children. We make few facile assumptions about 'natural' or 'basic' knowledge being already in children. Oddly, we assume that adults know a lot of things which they do not. (11)

The term 'mass psychosis' has been coined to describe "aberrations characteristic of all or most members of the functioning society, aberrations considered by everyone to be "normal." We are living in a world where honesty and the correct assessment of situations often seem like insanity, at best like humour." Much of the behaviour of past and contemporary humanity, especially war and destruction, makes a mockery of such notions as "civilization" and "progress." It is wisely said that "human beings have an infinite capacity for both self-development and self-destruction."

People believe in progress and culture. *There is no progress whatever.* Everything is just the same as it was thousands, and tens of thousands, of years ago. The outward form changes. The essence does not change. Man remains just the same. 'Civilized' and 'cultured' people live with exactly the same interests as the most ignorant savages. Modern civilization is based on violence and slavery and fine words. But all these fine words about 'progress' and 'civilization' are merely words. (12)

### **Human Beings as 'Machines'**

Most people tend to react mechanically to external influences and impressions, much like a machine. Without conscious attention and presence, life is experienced "in exactly the same way as rain falls as a result of a change in the temperature in the higher regions of the atmosphere or the surrounding clouds, as snow melts under the rays of the sun, as dust rises with the wind." Gurdjieff articulated this idea in stark terms:

Man is a machine. All his deeds, actions, words, thoughts, feelings, convictions, opinions, and habits are the results of external influences, external impressions. Everything he says, does, thinks, feels – all this happens . . . to establish this fact for oneself, to understand it, to be convinced of its truth, means getting rid of a thousand illusions about man, about his being creative and consciously organizing his own life, and so on. (13)

The analogy of "people as machines" suggests that most individuals react to external circumstances "like a marionette pulled here and there by invisible strings." To a visitor from another

planet, human behaviour would seem to appear oddly homogeneous, mechanical, unconscious and reactive:

The human being is so intensely standardized that an outside observer, noting his reaction to various stimuli, need not infer an individual controlling brain in each person. He would be more likely to infer the existence of a separate, outside brain, and the people as mere manifestations of its will. (14)

The consequences of automatic and reactive behaviour have serious implications for humanity, both individually and collectively. In many ways the structure, influence and belief systems of contemporary societal institutions resemble a vast machine which enslaves human beings through imitation, conditioning and conformity. "Man is becoming a willing slave who no longer needs chains. He begins to grow fond of his slavery, to be proud of it." Think only of the world of politics, advertising, entertainment and mass media:

Contemporary man is dragged along in a producing and consuming cog-wheel system to the point where he begins to become part of the machine and loses mastery of himself. Daily life dissipates our spirit, eats up our time and thus does not leave the opportunity to become aware of ourselves and return to our deepest self. Accustomed as we are to being constantly "occupied," if these occupations should happen to be taken from us, we find ourselves empty and abandoned. (15)

Most individuals are unable to recognize the automatic, mechanical nature of much of their behaviour and the misleading attributions they assign to their perceptions. "We quite clearly see a growth of personality at the cost of essence, a growth of the artificial, the unreal, and what is foreign, at the cost of the natural, the real, and what is one's own." The pervasive mechanical, machine-like behaviour of human beings prevents the development of higher consciousness and access to subtle spiritual energy.

What is the source of this mysterious energy, which animates us and all our manifestations, from birth to death, and even beyond? The aim of the teaching is to rediscover this source of life through the development of consciousness. But consciousness hides behind a "mask" – it is the prisoner of human conditioning. In reality, our perception of this primal energy is veiled and obscured by the vast disorder of our functions. This disorder is created by a multitude of tensions and complex automatized reactions, which themselves are the result of deeper layers of conditioning . . . We remain unaware of this primal energy – even though we sometimes get closer to it by intuition. We are trapped in the straight-jacket of our automatism, unable to escape from its confines, from the inextricable relation between the habitual movements of our mind and the automatized functioning of our personality . . . This machine creates delusions and it is not possible for us, in the ordinary course of our life, to realize the extent to which we are prisoners to our automatism. Very special conditions are necessary to

recognize this, so that another quality of attention and self-awareness may appear. (16)

## Heedlessness and Inattention

Lack of attention is one of the major characteristics of human life. "Heedlessness, confusion and inattention must be set aside as they interfere with both effectiveness in ordinary life situations and the attainment of higher, more refined, perceptions." One of the major forms of heedlessness in everyday life occurs when a person's awareness is trapped by dwelling on the past or generating expectations of the future:

Q: Here is something which strikes me as being rather significant, and it happens every day; one does one thing while thinking about another. For instance, I often happen to put my keys down somewhere, and the next moment I can't remember where they are, because I was thinking of something else and I was not really present. Is this not a very ordinary example showing that most of the time we are not present to ourselves?

A: Yes it is. We are always somewhere else, living ahead or behind in time, we long for the future or we regret the past. We are never really here. This flight in time is of great significance. If we turn away from the present, or rather if the present is so often unable to hold our attention, it is because we conceive of it as being a known and registered reality, therefore devoid of interest, or as a disappointing one. Just so long as we have not understood that true bliss is not in objects but in us, we continue to place our hope in the future and keep racing ahead. We thus live in a state of imbalance, bent upon, and striving endlessly towards the future. What we must come to understand is that awareness in the present is the only true starting point and that this starting point is at the same time the point of arrival. (17)

Faulty perception and misunderstandings play a major role in everyday human life. "People ordinarily are prone to considerable mistakes in perception and understanding, and are easily misled by wrong information . . . It is precisely because of the unreliability of vision, of memory, of wanting to believe, of induced belief that an objective perception must be acquired before even familiar things can be seen as they are." A Sufi teaching story, "Seeing and Understanding," describes the condition of people who in ordinary life are unable to perceive things which are obvious because their awareness and attention are directed elsewhere. A powerful King was annoyed when a wise Sufi stated that most people were 'blind' and could not understand what they saw, and offered the King a demonstration:

"What do I have to do?" asked the King.

"You will sit for one day in the bazaar, the local market, in your robes and

wearing your crown, hammering upon a brass tray.”

And so the King sat there all day with the Sufi beside him. Every few minutes someone stopped and asked, “What are you doing?” and the Sufi, sitting nearby, took down his or her name.

At the end of the day, the Sufi said: “Your Majesty – here is the list of all the people who stopped and were so blind that they could not see what you were doing, hammering a brass tray, and had to ask.”

The King was quite impressed; but then a thought struck him. “Yes, but what about a list of people who are *not* blind but still cannot understand what they see?”

“That’s easy” said the Sufi, “all you have to do is make a copy of the same list and it will do just as well.” (18)

Gurdjieff’s concepts of ‘identification’ and ‘considering’ explain a number of human manifestations of heedlessness, inattention and mechanical behaviour such as lying, imagination, unnecessary talking and the expression of negative emotions:

‘Identifying’ or ‘identification’ is a curious state in which man passes more than half his life. He ‘identifies’ with everything: with what he says, what he feels, what he believes, what he does not believe, what he wishes, what he does not wish, what attracts him, what repels him. Everything absorbs him, and he cannot separate himself from the idea, the feeling, or the object that absorbed him. This means that in the state of identification man is incapable of looking impartially on the object of his identification . . . The second sleep-producing state, akin to identification, is *considering*. Actually, ‘considering’ is identification with people. It is a state in which man constantly worries what other people think of him; whether they give him his due, whether they admire him enough, and so on. ‘Considering’ plays a very important part in everyone’s life, but in some people it becomes an obsession. All their lives are filled with considering – that is, worry, doubt and suspicion – and there remains no place for anything else. Both of these, ‘identifying’ and ‘considering,’ must be observed most seriously. Only full knowledge of them can diminish them. If one cannot see them in oneself, one can easily see them in other people. But one must remember that one in no way differs from others. In this sense all people are equal. (19)

A common human mistake is to confuse the secondary with the primary and vice versa. People generally have no sense of the relative importance and significance of individuals and events. They believe that important things are unimportant, and trivial ones vital.

Our fascination with the phenomenal world obscures the perception of our fundamental unconditioned nature as pure awareness and being. The cure for heedlessness, inattention and forgetfulness is a choiceless objective awareness which reveals the nature of our mechanical physical, emotional and mental functioning.



Q: Why should I imagine myself so wretched?

A: You do it by habit only. Change your ways of feeling and thinking, take stock of them and examine them closely. You are in bondage by inadvertence. Attention liberates. You are taking so many things for granted. Begin to question. You have put so much energy into building a prison for yourself. Now spend as much on demolishing it. In fact, demolition is easy, for the false dissolves when it is discovered. (20)

### **Enlarging the Human Perspective**

According to traditional spiritual teachings, the human soul is cut off from its 'parent stem' and must re-establish its natural harmonious connection with creation through a process of self-examination and inner development. The experiences of ordinary life are only a small portion of the many dimensions of existence. "The whole array of mundane experiences are reflections of an ultimate reality."

The meditations of Rumi include some remarkable ideas, designed to bring the Seeker into an understanding of the fact that he is temporarily out of contact with complete reality, even though ordinary life seems to be the totality of reality itself. What we see, feel and experience in ordinary, unfulfilled life is only a part of the great whole. There are dimensions which we can reach only through effort. Like the submerged portions of the iceberg, they are there, though unperceived under ordinary conditions. Also like the iceberg, they are far greater than could be suspected by superficial study. (21)

According to Gurdjieff, the ability to act consciously and with a higher intention separates the developed human being from the ordinary man or woman:

Man is the being who can "do," says this teaching. To do means to act consciously and according to one's will. All the differences which strike us among men can be reduced to the differences in the consciousness of their actions. Men seem to us to vary so much just because the actions of some of them are, according to our opinion, deeply conscious, while the actions of others are so unconscious that they even seem to surpass the unconsciousness of stones, which at least react rightly to external phenomena. The question is complicated by the mere fact that often one and the same man shows us, side by side with what appears to us entirely conscious actions of will, other quite unconscious animal-mechanical reactions. In virtue of this, man appears to us to be an extraordinarily complicated being. This teaching denies this complication and puts before us a very difficult task in connection with man. Man is he who can

“do” but among ordinary men, as well as among those who are considered extraordinary, there are few who can “do.” (22)

Spiritual development brings a perception of the inner aspect of existence that is normally invisible to the majority of humanity, whose perception of their potential and of objective Reality is full of subjective imaginings and conditioning. Those who can participate in ‘conscious evolution’ are able to perceive the complexity and inter-relationship of all aspects of reality:

The Sufis maintain that man, like all living things, is included in a continual and evolutionary process within the Universe. It is man’s duty to take part harmoniously in this process and to participate in the advancement of this evolution. But because of his way of seeing things, he can only become partially aware of the process. His perceptions are faulty because they are subjective and relative and are conditioned by the outside world; therefore man interprets things according to limited patterns that are not objective and consequently he has little capacity for judging things correctly. The most complex interrelation of cause and effect that would explain reality cannot be transcribed into the language of the mind in its present state.

“What we take to be reality is really more primitive short-term rule of thumb. For example, we tend to look at events one-sidedly. We also assume, without any justification, that an event happens as it were in a vacuum. In actual fact, all events are associated with all other events . . . If you look at any action which you do, or which anyone else does, you will find that it was prompted by one of many possible stimuli; and also that it is never an isolated action – it has consequences, many of them ones which you would never expect, certainly which you could not have planned . . . It is only when we are ready to experience our interrelation with the organism of life that we can appreciate mystical experience. That is to say a direct and total perception of truth.” (*The Sufis*). Meanwhile man is in a state that is called ‘a dream.’ (23)

The fully developed human being is awake to the truly important aspects of life while ignoring the transient and secondary. “Humanity is circling around reality. It must enter the circle instead of following its perimeter.”

Q: What is the right use of mind?

A: Fear and greed cause the misuse of the mind. The right use of the mind is in the service of love, of life, of truth, of beauty.

Q: Easier said than done. Love of truth, of man, goodwill – what luxury! We need plenty of it to set the world right, but who will provide?

A: You can spend an eternity looking elsewhere for truth and love, intelligence and goodwill, imploring God and man – all in vain. You must begin in yourself,

with yourself – this is the inexorable law. You cannot change the image without changing the face. First realize that your world is only a reflection of yourself and stop finding fault with the reflection. Attend to yourself, set yourself right – mentally and emotionally. The physical self will follow automatically. You talk so much of reforms; economic, social, political. Leave alone the reforms and mind the reformer. What kind of world can a man create who is stupid, greedy, heartless? (24)

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