

CULTS AND DETERIORATED SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

*'Counterfeit gold exists only because
there is such a thing as real gold'
Rumi*

In many countries in the contemporary world, especially in the West, there are representatives of virtually every religion, spiritual teaching, cult and metaphysical system in existence. How can the earnest spiritual seeker distinguish between an authentic teaching and a cult, between a real and a false spiritual teacher? What are the salient characteristics of a genuine spiritual group or organization and what are the warning signs for detecting a spurious or misguided one? Psychiatrist Arthur Deikman provides a succinct working definition of a cult:

The word *cult* refers to a group led by a charismatic leader who has spiritual, therapeutic or messianic pretensions, and indoctrinates the members with his or her idiosyncratic beliefs. Typically, members are dependent on the group for their emotional and financial needs and have broken off ties with those outside. The more complete the dependency and the more rigid the barriers separating members from non-believers, the more danger the cult will exploit and harm its members. (1)

The deterioration and distortion of a spiritual teaching over time is aptly illustrated by the history of Christianity following the death of Jesus as his message of love, forgiveness and redemption passed through successive stages of deformation:

- (1) The being and enlightenment of Jesus Christ: *Love and mercy*
- (2) The words and actions of Jesus as a teacher: *Spiritual impact on those who came in contact with him during his lifetime*
- (3) Recollections of the direct followers of Jesus: *The twelve disciples of Christ*
- (4) Selective oral and written records of his teaching: *New Testament and Gnostic teachings*
- (5) Censorship and removal of the esoteric teachings: *Council of Nicaea 325 A.D.*
- (6) Division and fragmentation: *Roman Catholic church vs. Protestant church; splitting of Protestantism into competing sects*
- (7) Fanaticism; true believers vs. infidels: *The Inquisition*

Identifying and Understanding Cults

Cults can range from a relatively benign mixture of real and distorted teachings (well intentioned but misguided) to clearly harmful and exploitive groups (brainwashing and indoctrination). One of the principal causes of the proliferation of imitation spiritual groups is the sheer number of seekers demanding inner knowledge, thus creating a “supply and demand” situation which has an almost commercial or transactional nature and dynamic.

Many current metaphysical systems throughout the world are distorted versions of an originally complete and functional teaching. Such cults and imitative ‘schools’ lack real developmental value and represent the survival of pieces of a once intact and comprehensive tradition. In general, spiritual teachings have followed a seemingly inevitable process of deviation from the original intention so that the aim becomes lost and the system becomes mechanical and repetitive. Any valid spiritual teaching is vulnerable to distortion and misunderstanding when it enters the ‘world.’ There is a saying: *‘Whatever goes into a salt-mine becomes salt.’*

Spiritual teachings are subject to a process of crystallization or fossilization whereby the inner, dynamic element is no longer functioning effectively and the teaching deviates from its original purity, purpose and intent. This can take the form of inflexible doctrines, standardized observances and exercises, and hostility to other groups. Such schools or groups become mere ritualistic institutions that continue to ‘grind flour without making any bread,’ and are unable to progress further:

The outward form or husk may, however, persist and contrive to perform social or otherwise comparatively less significant functions. The inheritors of these forms seldom, if ever, realize that the entity is ‘organically dead.’ This is why almost the last place in which to seek the continuation of an authentic transmission is in apparently well-established traditionalistic bodies. These are more efficiently described as archeological relics, easily recognized as such by those who know their original extent, purpose and vitality. They develop a sort of quasi-adaptability, or else a rigidity – or a combination of these. The consequence of these characteristics is to cause them either to seek support from new formulations or else to try to fight them. They always, however, lack real adaptability, consistent with contemporary needs. This peculiarity arises when there is a preoccupation with preservation of archaic and anachronistic forms. Effective higher teaching, in contrast, always seeks to employ any form within which it can complete its mission.

(2)

The world’s great religions have largely followed the inevitable path of decay and distortion with the passage of time. An example is Christianity. In its original form Christianity was a living tradition of personal and direct experience of spiritual truth without the intermediary of an institutionalized Church and priests. It has been said that few Christian leaders today would recognize or accept Jesus if they met him. Others wonder: “How much Christianity, as we have

it today, is the teaching of Christ himself, and how much is the contribution of Paul, John, Peter, Augustine, and even Aristotle and others."

Christianity is therefore constituted not only with the teaching of Jesus himself but with all the dogmatic and speculative interpretations concerning the personality of Jesus and his doctrine that have accumulated ever since the death of the founder. In other words, Christ did not found the religious system known by his name, but he was made its founder by his followers. If he were still among them, it is highly improbable that he would sanction all the theories, beliefs and practices which are now imposed upon self-styled Christians. If he were asked whether their learned dogmas were his religion, he might not know how to answer. He would in all likelihood profess complete ignorance of all the philosophical subtleties of Christian theology of the present day. (3)

One of the hallmarks of a diluted spiritual teaching is when the vehicle is mistaken for the objective. In decayed systems the container is more important than the content. Simplified or deteriorated systems often regard factors which are peripheral, transitory or secondary as primary and central. "Temporary teaching frames suited to a specific community have later been adopted as sacrosanct and its activities have become over-simplified into supposed essentials." The secondary features of a teaching tend to persist over time as a sort of 'outer shell' which only partially represents the essential inner element which leads to real transformation:

Nowhere is vanity so marked as in the supposedly diligent and virtuous observation of norms and behaviour of a tradition. Because a certain person did or said something, because a certain group of people followed a certain path, these things – when blindly followed or rationalized – are believed to confer sanctity, to be better than other things, to constitute a 'Way.' Few things are further from the truth. The truth, of course, is that vanity brings imitation. Imitation is not a way to truth. (4)

Simplistic spiritual systems ignore the requirements of 'time, place and people' by failing to tailor their teachings to current circumstances. "If you are using two-thousand year old terms you may be trying to 'work' in a role suited to the people of 2,000 years ago." Many of the rituals, practices and written works employed by these teachings are the crystallized remnants of a previously comprehensive teaching and are no longer applicable for the present time:

Some Eastern teachers have come to the West with the intention of initiating the Western public to their spiritual tradition. The intention is fine, but the task is difficult. If there is not a sufficiently deep understanding of the Western culture and mentality, success cannot really be had. There is the risk of simply imposing the Oriental way of seeing on the Westerners, who will find it difficult to accept. Zen is not a collection of rituals; it is life. Westerners who live in different social circumstances from those of the East cannot merely imitate the

Oriental. In the same way that Chinese Zen has Chinese characteristics, so Western Zen must be Western in its form. (5)

In authentic spiritual teachings, 'skillful means' are utilized to guide people in their efforts toward awakening. "If these means are taken as ends, that is to say, as the description of Awakening or as Awakening itself, they cannot play their useful role; on the contrary they become a sort of permanent prison."

Classical Zen teaching is characterized by freedom from blind clinging to forms, employing forms as instruments rather than perpetuating them as idols, employing forms when, where, and as they are effective, discarding forms when they become obstructions . . . It is not, however, invariably practiced in institutionalized settings because it requires supra-conventional expertise and defies some of the most deeply seated of human tendencies. A Zen proverb says, "When one person transmits a falsehood, myriad people transmit it as truth." The tendency to dogmatize and hallow the traces of temporary expedients appears again and again in history – not only in religious and cultural history, but also in the history of science. It is for this reason that so much of Zen teaching involves dismantling, superseding and renewing in the visible dimension, even while its invisible aim remains constant throughout. (6)

Without supersession and renewal there is no fresh growth; a teaching will merely reproduce effects designed for people of a different time or cultural milieu. "Deteriorated or repetitive cults use outdated or irrelevant techniques, regalia, even clothes and languages, when they drift -- or are imported -- from one time and culture to another."

One of the inevitable consequences of a teacher's death is the appearance of divisions among the disciples and different interpretations given to the ideas and practices conveyed to them. The followers who carry on the externals employed by a former teacher, and who have no real mandate or appointed mission, are essentially automatons. A cult emerges when misguided individuals distort the outer shape of a real teaching into something else (a religion, guru-worship, arid scholasticism) by catering to the emotional, intellectual, social and therapeutic demands of people. And, those who are well-intentioned, but lacking in real knowledge, may interfere with and attempt to modify (and hence distort) genuine spiritual teachings. The Prophet Mohammed: *'By pious fools hath my back been broken.'*

Metaphysical groups can easily degenerate into power structures affording the leaders the means and opportunities for dominating and manipulating others. This has been evidenced in a number of cases of abuse documented in various spiritual communities in recent years in both the East and the West. These scandals have involved, among other things, inappropriate sexual relations between a teacher and a student, excessive drinking and drug use, interference in the personal lives of students and their families, authoritarian leadership styles, financial impropriety and extravagant, self-indulgent lifestyles:

A number of Zen groups in North America have recently experienced severe growing pains. Some have been divided over the most suitable form of practice for Western students of Zen. Some have suffered because of a confusion of lay and monastic goals, attempting to impose a lifestyle appropriate for a monk or nun on laypeople with regular work and families to consider. Several communities have had to deal with problems of leadership and organization. There have been teachers who have confused their personal interests with those of the community or who let social acclaim go to their heads . . . There have been instances of teachers who have gone beyond the normally accepted teacher-pupil relationship in Zen, taken advantage of the authority of their office and imposed their personal sexual desires on male and female students. Most of these problems have been settled by discussion within the communities themselves. Some, however, have been so severe and divisive that the community has been shattered, marriages broken, and individuals badly scarred. People involved have been forced to ask themselves whether the cause was simple human weakness, inadequate organization and knowledge, or a fundamental ethical blind spot within Zen itself. (7)

When spiritual teachings lose touch with certain essential elements they can deviate from their purpose as vehicles of inner development and no longer provide any real fulfilment for their followers. At their worst they can actually harm or cripple a person's higher aspirations and spiritual potentiality. It is not always advantageous to point out to members of cults that their beliefs and practices represent the deterioration of a once viable teaching. Disturbing their equilibrium without substituting a meaningful alternative can, in some instances, actually be harmful:

Many of these schools or cults are social phenomena, strongly believed in by their adherents, who have more often than not stabilized their lives and their psychological equilibrium on the literal or allegorical truth of what someone else may see as vestiges, fossils, even, of a teaching school. To disturb such a situation can seldom have the kind of salutary results that some optimists might suppose. Apart from hostility, sheer depression can be caused. Quite often too, nothing at all happens. (8)

There is a demand, on the part of some concerned observers, for the establishment of authoritative bodies to regulate metaphysical and spiritual entities even though such regulatory bodies are rarely successful in any field outside of certain strict professional disciplines:

People in the West are constantly asking why there are so many false 'spiritual schools' in Europe and America, and why the Eastern exponents of the genuine traditions do not establish and maintain legitimate organizations which will show up and defeat these frauds and self-deluded entities. Now, there are innumerable fakes and idiots practising all kinds of medicine, say, and commerce, art,

science, therapy, education, in the West, who make a good living in spite of regulatory institutions: so the existence and activity of such a body does not have the effect fantasized for it. So much for the official control idea. (9)

Some Characteristics of Cults

There are sharp differences between authentic spiritual teachings and deteriorated strains which mask as real schools of inner development. It is important for would-be students and 'seekers of truth' to familiarize themselves with the nature of cults and false teachings in order to discriminate the 'real gold from the false.' Some of the identifying attributes and characteristics of cults include:

- Authoritarian, hierarchical, power-based structure
- Secretiveness, overly serious or morbid atmosphere, lack of a sense of humour
- Claims that the group is the sole repository of truth, or is the only true 'path'
- Material and monetary enrichment of the organization and its leaders
- Veneration of the personality of the teacher, guru-worship, asserting the uniqueness and superhuman qualities of the leader
- Accepting all interested seekers without ascertaining their degree of preparation, suitability and ability to benefit
- Withdrawal and separation of the followers from the population at large
- Imitation, attachment to names, symbols and other superficial externals
- Pandering to the social, psychological and therapeutic needs of the followers, acting as a substitute for family and normal social contacts
- Failing to distinguish between emotionality and spirituality
- 'Idolatry' – which includes ascribing people, animals or objects with a special meaning
- Self-preoccupation of the followers, the desire for attention or prominence
- Conditioning or training of group members, implanting obsessions, emphasis on hope and fear, reward and punishment
- Seeking to organize and systematize flexible and 'organic' teachings without real understanding
- Over-simplification, when a single method or 'formula' is imagined to be enough "to storm the gates of Heaven"
- Subjecting everyone to the same exercises and observances, disregarding individual differences and levels of development
- Randomly mixing teachings and techniques from various sources and traditions
- Employing stereotyped techniques, rituals and exercises without consideration of the principle of 'time, place and people'
- Investing temporary instrumental methods with 'holy' or 'totemic' importance
- Preoccupation with traditional values of ethics and virtue at the expense of individual perception of truth

Externals and Outward Appearance

Many of the symbols, ceremonies, dress and other trappings used by contemporary religious and spiritual institutions are the remnants of an originally comprehensive teaching in which their proper usage was understood. A common human tendency is to adopt the appearance and outer practices of people and institutions which are respected or admired. This human mimetic habit leads people to copy the mannerisms and behaviour of those whom they esteem. Mechanical imitation of this sort interferes with the learning potential of an aspirant by diverting energy and attention to secondary phenomena. It is useless in terms of any real spiritual development and may even be harmful.

People often become attached to the superficial dimensions of an esoteric system simply because the practices, exercises, rituals and atmosphere seem so exotic. Things which are colorful, appealing or interesting because of their novelty are often regarded by such individuals as highly significant to their spiritual life. The typical Western seeker who travels to the East is attracted to the outer façade, the emotion and the mystique, of Eastern mystical teachings. "The lure and mystery of the colourful East has for centuries obscured for the Western mind the fact that it is the human development which is aimed at, not the trappings."

The exotic ambience of some Eastern religions and spiritual teachings can be very alluring. "One way to recognize a cult as a cult is its superficial Orientalism. Authentic Zen is not a side-show, the teaching is to harmonize with the environment, as illustrated in the proverb, 'A good craftsman leaves no trace'."

We can easily get carried away by the exotica of a spiritual practice. The Zen Buddhist tradition, for example, has great beauty, especially for the Westerner who encounters it for the first time. It is like a drink of cool water on a hot day. What the Zen masters say has an austerity, a clarity; the meditation room has the sheer beauty of simplicity, the monk's robes and bald head have an appeal; the posture has great dignity; the chanting, a power – and it is so easy for us to get swept up by the exotica, the trappings. However, we must pass on swiftly beyond the exotic; we are not engaged in a mystical activity in which we try to encourage a mystical state of mind above and away from the clash and clang of everyday life. (10)

One of the signs of a degenerated spiritual school is the employment of clothing and dress for emotional and psychological reasons: "Dressing up in clothes not of the period or country where the individual or group lives and operates is imitative of the past – something which is an indication of an inner spiritual bankruptcy; and also, incidentally, regarded in a similar light by modern psychologists. People will, according to this doctrine, put on clothes as a compensation for a sense of inner emptiness."

Tradition, ritual, colour, ceremony, symbols and so on, have an undeniable appeal for most people even though such externals and secondary features represent a degeneration of real spiritual activity. Attraction to the outward appearance of things is a form of 'idolatry' in which the attention is fixed upon some external or intermediary element at the expense of alignment with the ultimate goal of spiritual development (mistaking 'the container for the content'):

In a more specific sense, Sufi studies have often deteriorated into the automatic and mimetic use of robes, beards, formulae and appurtenances. These exterior objects and concepts have a powerful appeal for those who need reassurance or who desire something strange. But their use without an understanding of any function which they might have or might have had, and the transitory nature of formulation designed to protect and conduct from one stage to another leads to 'idolatry' – the grasping and holding on to things which hamper progress because they are static. This is not a Sufi 'Way' at all, but a social phenomenon. At best we have a new tribe, at worst a coercive instrument. (11)

A common mistake made by those engaged in a spiritual quest is to confuse the external appearance and behaviour of a teacher, no matter how impressive, with inner spiritual attainment: "People judge others by their superficial behaviour; 'this man is very simple, he only eats one meal a day: therefore he must be good.' They judge him externally, and this is because we have been taught to judge externally. The real question should be: 'what is he really like?' rather than how does he appear and behave." Because of this tendency, many spiritual seekers have their attention diverted from real teachings toward things which are secondary and ultimately superficial:

The external appearance of things, which sometimes has included music and dancing, strange garb and regalia, importance in the community, the air of secrets and achievement, all these may have a place, but they do not constitute spiritual study, any more than the externals of anything are the same as the basis, the root, the reality, the work which goes into producing the effect or the appearance. Not unnaturally, imitators organize ceremonies and initiations, gatherings and groups, studies and so on, including emotion-arousing so-called 'teachings,' even books and recitals, which have this attractive quality. Some people never find out that they have been, in fact, consumers of externals and vanities, not spiritual people at all. (12)

In certain circumstances and at certain times, specific clothing or objects may be employed in a spiritual sense if they are functional and not merely assigned value as an outer indication of inner attainment: "It can take the form of putting on a patched robe to show that one is poor, wearing a monk's habit and carrying a crucifix, using a rosary, shaving one's head, wearing different robes, and so on. This is perfectly normal in a certain context. It demonstrates one's adherence to a spiritual situation (such as pilgrimage). It is not a measure of the person's inner development and spirituality."

The Sociological and Psychological Nature of Groups

There is a powerful underlying dynamic in the formation and activities of spiritual and other groups which is rooted in the basic psychological need for human contact and togetherness. This desire to group and congregate is a natural instinctive human tendency and needs to be clearly acknowledged and understood in spiritual work. Individuals who lack family or other forms of companionship will often seek associations with others as a compensation, even in settings or at times when these may not be useful for spiritual growth and development:

When a number of people combine for a common purpose, it is always taken as axiomatic that they are brought together, and kept united, by the label, the apparent aim of the group. The reality is the other way about. If the desire to group were not there, nobody would think of forming a group. If the alleged purpose of the group were not there, another would be adopted . . . People cherish their groups. They also have a genuine interest in the avowed aims of the group. Anyone who seems to them to be deriding or in any way threatening the group, even by raising legitimate questions about it, is perceived as hostile. Psychologically speaking, then, there is a factor in group-behaviour which can have serious consequences for the group and its members, the most conspicuous being that people find it hard to get away from the group, even when it is not desirable for them to stay in it. (13)

Many cults pander to this natural demand for 'togetherness' in human beings, even though playing upon this tendency is unproductive in terms of spiritual development. "The great peril in study-groupings is that they become miniature tribes or families, cults and frames for finding social satisfactions, not learning, let alone understanding."

Nothing highlights the non-spiritual but very social character of many relationships so much as the need for contact, association, relationship. People feel that they should be near someone of sanctity; that they should impart their blessings to others; that some sort of frequent or constant contact has some spiritual dimension. The fact is, of course, that there are times and places where it is more important for people with mutual spiritual interest to be apart rather than together. Those who understand this and have experienced it are the spiritual people. Those who have not, are part of a sociological phenomenon: herding. (14)

People frequently confuse social and community behaviour with spiritual activity. Metaphysical groups can easily become a collection of individuals searching for a social circle, a 'tribe' or a therapeutic entity. A certain prior degree of social integration and stabilization is an asset for anyone approaching a spiritual teaching.

It is important to recognize the difference between a social contact and a higher, spiritual contact. Many cults operate as disguised socio-psychological groups which meet the social, emotional, security, therapeutic and intellectual needs of seekers. "If the intending student is in need of reassurance, adventure, catharsis, social and psychological equilibrium, he or she will only too gratefully and unquestioningly be attracted to the lower level of activity. This is because they will be responding to what the group is offering in practice, not what a real teaching can offer."

There has been confusion between teaching and the social or human function. To help or to entertain someone is a social, not an esoteric, duty. As a human being you always have the social and humanitarian duty. But you do not necessarily have the therapeutic duty; indeed, you may be much less qualified for it than almost any conventional professional therapist. It is impossible to spend time with virtually any religion, philosophical or esoteric group without seeing that a large number of the people involved, perhaps through no fault of their own, and because of ignorance of the problem, are using these formats for sociological and psychological purposes of a narrow kind. It is not that their spiritual life is right in these groups. It is that their social life is inadequate. (15)

Cults tend to accept almost anyone into their fold or try to convince people to leave their current religion or spiritual group and embrace the cult's precepts. Random or haphazard groups are formed when a cult accepts all comers or tries to attract and recruit disciples. "One way of deciphering the real from the false is to find out how easy or difficult it is to enroll in the teaching. If you are welcomed with open arms, without a reasonable period of preparation or probation, generally speaking, you have not encountered a genuine school."

Groups which are random collections of 'seekers' rarely develop beyond a certain point. Accidental groupings of such individuals can actually generate negative and even destructive consequences. "People collected at random, or merely because they want, for group-mentality reasons, to enroll, cannot form, for all practical purposes, a real learning group. Merely collecting what are sometimes called 'like-minded people' does not lead to harmonization. The statement here is: "Every gathering of people has its own potential. Those collected arbitrarily have only physical, mental or emotional potential."

The right people at the right place at the right time has many reasons. One of the most important of these is that if you group people wrongly, you exaggerate their undesirable characteristics. Although not so rapid nor so publicly visible, you can get a similar effect to the proneness of a mass of people to become a mob. Just as a random collection of people assembled around an over-simplified issue easily becomes a mindless mob, irrational and even destructive, so may people collected together, without adequate preparation and safeguards, become a corroding factor in spiritual matters. They may damage themselves and others. (16)

In any group there is a subtle pressure to conform to the norms of the group, leading to imitation and a desire to please the group leaders. "Spiritual training can hook right into this pre-existing compulsive pattern. Being praised, or praising oneself for making progress, gives satisfaction and the impetus for further striving. This can enhance one's self-image, flatter one's vanity."

Most Zen centers and communities offer group meditation sittings on a regular basis. Very often in such a community it is very important (or even required) to be in the meditation hall at certain set hours. If one attends sittings conscientiously, one may be regarded as a serious and promising student by the teacher and senior disciples. So, in addition to the longed-for goal of betterment or enlightenment, there is the immediate reward of being considered a "good boy" or "good girl." Participating in sittings, conforming to what fellow members are doing, bestows the comforting sense of belonging and the exhilaration of shared energy. We do like to feel safe and good, and we will make great efforts to attain this feeling of security and righteousness. Conversely, not sitting arouses guilt feelings about not doing what one expects of oneself and what those in authority expect of one. In either case, old habits continue to be reinforced and to dominate one's life, without light being shed on them. (17)

One of the potential dangers in belonging to a spiritual group is the formation of a clan or elite in-group, producing uniformity of belief and behaviour. "People connected with human groups, irrespective of their overt objectives, may be (1) mainly seeking attention or (2) responding to herd instincts the price of which is to adopt the apparent aims of the group."

Organizations and groups which advocate withdrawal from the world and the avoidance of normal human contacts are essentially unbalanced. However, under certain specific circumstances, withdrawal from the world may be beneficial in a person's spiritual life: "There is a function in temporary withdrawal for the purposes of certain parts of the work, but total withdrawal is nonsense." Cults which advise separating from society and living a life of asceticism and monasticism ignore the importance of a healthy and constructive involvement in daily life, following the dictum: '*Be in the world, but not of it.*'

Spirituality can be a way of life, in the sense that people can devote all their time and effort in a search for developing spirituality. In some cultures, this implies living in a cave in a mountain or doing things like rejecting the world, abandoning everything, meditating constantly, eating almost nothing or very little. We hold that this is incorrect, because it is not a balanced or harmonious activity. Even if it satisfies the person themselves, that they feel more spiritual or closer to God by rejecting the world and so forth, I think that their attitude is not correctly balanced. Everybody has someone to whom they are related, who needs them, who cares for them, who wants them. They have a place in a family and a function in society which they can and should perform

as well as possible . . . People who withdraw are in fact abdicating their responsibility towards themselves and towards other people; they are no longer being tested by the fact that they have to earn their living, pay their telephone bill, pay their taxes. (18)

Self-constituted 'spiritual' groups which lack a real teacher are usually unable to properly assess the needs of the students and prescribe appropriate practices due to the absence of any real technical knowledge of the dynamics of group work: "If self-teaching has its severe limitations, the establishment of groups often leads to even more bizarre results. The reason for this is that the leaders of these groups, although frequently full of good intentions, lack the necessary expertise. Skill in 'running a group' is not a substitute for the perception of the spiritual condition of the group and all of its members, constantly monitored."

Certain higher teachings have retained the special knowledge relating to the correct grouping of people for purposes of spiritual attainment. Imitation groups have lost the sense of this 'coming-together,' producing instead a sort of pantomime of a real spiritual group:

What takes its place is social 'togetherness,' or emotional enthusiasm, or conditioned response to being in a collection of people. No higher attainment is possible to a person unless the circumstances of the coming-together are correct; unless it is a communion including the right people, at the right time, in the right place. Impatience, ignorance, sentimentality, intellectualism tend to cause people to convert the true grouping situation until it becomes something else. (19)

Emotionality Mistaken for Spirituality

Emotion is a powerful factor in all aspects of human life. The confusion of emotionality and sentimentality with spirituality is a common mistake for many people: "What the ordinary person calls 'spirituality' is usually a vague aspiration towards something 'higher,' or perhaps an indulgence in certain forms of emotion, hallowed only by custom, because of their historical or associative connection with what have been assumed or claimed for a long time to be spiritual things."

Members of most cultures are usually unable to discriminate between emotional feelings of an undifferentiated kind and higher experiences of a spiritual nature. When people mistake emotional feelings for spiritual ones, they are generally incapable of developing further in their inner life, such is the conditioning power of emotions. "Communities and individuals reared in the emotional and conditioned use of rituals and other procedures have to undergo a reorientation before they can perceive a higher content in such observances."

The overactive indulgence of crude and unrefined emotion often leads to the unconscious assumption that "excitement must be meaningful." People often assume that things which emotionally stir them must be of great importance and significance. Individuals who are deeply moved by, say, a beautiful cathedral in the moonlight, often feel that they have experienced something transcendental and do not realize that their feelings may be entirely subjective. In many religions and cults intense sensations and emotions are often sought in the mistaken belief that they are signposts of spiritual awakening:

We think/feel that strong emotions experienced during church services or other religious rituals and ceremonies give evidence of the workings of the Divine. Who is it that thinks that? Who feels that? Who has invented the ceremonies and scriptures in the first place and then feels divinely inspired by them? One may protest that these are the words and revelations of the Divine, but our protestations do not turn conviction into truth. Could emotionality actually be a "subtle valuing of the self by the self?" When there is no sense of self, is there religious emotion? When the self is not operating, religious experience takes on an altogether different meaning. Then it is the instant gathering of energy in the full presence of what is. (20)

Self-deception operates in full measure when people regard experiences which are unusual as 'spiritual' or 'mystical.' The misunderstanding of subjective emotions can even lead some individuals to believe that certain experiences are 'special gifts' when in fact they may be the very reverse. Not all intense experiences are useful, important or significant:

Some experiences may be useless, others are certainly harmful. In amusement-systems (whatever they call themselves) the emphasis is naturally on experience, because excitement and stimulus is what is really being demanded and offered. In a true learning system, however, as in all legitimate forms of education, what matters is the order of events and the preparedness of the learner, not the fact of the experience and what the individual happens to imagine it means, if anything. The experience-cravers, of course, lack the perspective to see what effect the experience is having on them. (21)

Many so-called 'higher' experiences are subjective and deceptive, mere forms of intoxication without any real developmental value. "Many people seek to attribute familiar sensations to a higher order of being, and assume that they are experiencing at least some measure of the divine or mystical in forms which are nothing more than grosser ones." The need to experience higher states of consciousness can become an obsession for people who feed on powerful emotions and feelings to the exclusion of other life interests:

The importance of the spiritual contact has, rightly, been emphasized on many occasions. Naturally, of course, this has led to it being imagined to be the real secret, the only way, the thing which must be persisted in to the exclusion of everything else; so that we have very numerous people and organizations in all

countries trying to establish and maintain this contact. The results of such lopsided efforts, of course, are to produce a large number of emotional or even sanctimonious people who *imagine* that they feel all kinds of things. They can usually be detected by observing whether or not they give *ordinary* people, those not interested in spiritual and esoteric matters, what is sometimes called 'the creeps.' If they seem weird, they probably are weird, not spiritual. Spiritual communication capacity is not to be grafted onto unsuitable bases. (22)

The desire for things which are special or secret is a common human characteristic. However, an inordinate desire for hidden and magical knowledge, for the unknown and unusual, blocks real spiritual growth and development. One way of distinguishing real from spurious spiritual groups is in their attitude towards what are called 'secrets.' Authentic teachings do not talk about experiences which are essentially inexpressible in words, while the false school will regard 'secrets' as mysterious or prized: "With a genuinely functional esoteric group, the 'secret' is ineffable; something which cannot be spoken or described. In diluted and secondary groups, this secret become secrecy, something prized for its own sake."

The powerful feelings which are invoked in certain forms of group work are often interpreted by the participants as highly meaningful spiritual experiences when they are more accurately described as psychological and sociological phenomena:

Q: I attended one of the group meditation sessions, held recently in Bombay, and witnessed the frenzy and self-abandon of the participants. Why do people go for such things?

A: These are all inventions of a restless mind pampering to people in search of sensation. Some of them help the unconscious to disgorge repressed memories and longings and to that extent they provide relief. But ultimately they leave the practitioner where he was – or worse. (23)

People who indulge in rapture, ecstasy or intoxicating experiences (including drug-induced ones), are generally out of touch with human life and remain essentially unaltered by their experiences. Seeking or indulging in ecstatic experiences has the effect of freezing the aspirant at a lower and more primitive stage of inner development:

Illumination cannot be sustained by someone who is not ready for it. At best it will throw him into an ecstatic state in which he is paralyzed, as it were, and unable to consummate the contact. That is why, although dervish poets speak of being "mad for love," they emphasize that this madness is the result of pre-view, not of genuine experience. It is recognized that genuine experience must take an active, mutual, meaningful form, not a form of useless intoxication. Inebriation mystics are those who stop short at this stage, and try to reproduce

the experience repetitiously, or approximate them on paper or in emotional art. This is the stage at which much experimentation in mysticism becomes bogged down. (24)

It is common to mistake powerful emotional and ecstatic experiences or altered states of consciousness for spiritual awakening. In the Zen Buddhist tradition this is called 'mistaking a fish eye for a pearl.' In the words of Zen scholar Thomas Cleary: "Since enlightenment may often be accompanied by a release of tension, there are cases where people mistake emotional catharsis for awakening, or even deliberately induce excessive tension in an effort to produce an ecstatic feeling of release. Attempts to mimic the Zen effect in this way can be observed in both Eastern and Western cults." Any attempts to expand consciousness are still within the bounds of the ego – the dualism of "myself and others" remains unaffected:

Q: Will you elaborate on the difference between the expansion of consciousness and enlightenment?

A: Enlightenment, or seeing into one's True-nature, is much more than an expansion of consciousness or a heightened awareness. True awakening takes place when both the conscious and subconscious minds have been "broken through" and the mind empties of all fantasies, images, thought forms, and blissful feelings. The difference between mind expansion and *satori* can be illustrated with a wrist-watch. The watch face, with its numbers, hands, and movement corresponds to relativity, our life in time and space, cause and effect, *karma*. The reverse side of the watch, which is blank, corresponds to the changeless, undifferentiated aspect of our life. Of this absolute realm nothing can be posited. One whose understanding is on the level of the discriminating intellect is like a person who sees the face but is unaware of the back of the watch. The expansion of consciousness can be likened to enlarging the face; but no matter how you enlarged it you would still be dealing with the face alone . . . A watch actually consists of a face *plus* a back. In the same way, with awakening comes the understanding that relative mind and absolute mind are two aspects of our True-nature. (25)

The common error of confusing emotionality with spirituality leaves people open to the possibility of manipulation, conditioning and even indoctrination. "Much of what passes for spiritual teaching relies, in reality, upon increasing greed, emotion and acquisitiveness. Of course, this is not understood by those who carry out such teachings; they imagine that emotionality is the same as spirituality."

It is a well established fact of psychology that when people who have been inhibited from showing emotion are allowed opportunities for cathartic expression they will feel better. Cults take advantage of this human tendency. Another tactic of cultish systems is the induction of anxiety, or its opposite, the assuaging or reduction of anxiety. These two processes act as conditioning mechanisms for the followers of these cults.

Most people cannot perceive the different ranges or scales of emotion, and tend to regard any strong emotion which moves them as "deep" or "profound." An important indication of spiritual sensitivity is the ability to work with subtle or refined perceptions and not just crude emotional impacts and stimuli:

Spiritual experience is difficult to register in the mind only for those who are too accustomed to crude impacts: rather as the sound of a watch ticking will not be audible to someone deafened by a church bell. It is interesting that things which move people powerfully in an emotional sense are often taken by them to be spiritual things. Primitive or ignorant people, of course, actually worship (until they learn better) as miracles or divine, natural things like thunder or manufactured things like guns . . . This primitive reaction lingers, especially in 'developed' countries. A sensitive or low-key experience is not sought, prized or understood where there is a cruder one. (26)

Self-Deception and Self-Preoccupation

When someone is fixated on their own personal quest for higher knowledge, ignoring the need for community and shared experience, they are effectively engaged in a selfish pursuit. "People interested in Zen should not approach it with the idea of achieving greatness, or with eagerness for success, or with desire for recognition. All of this is the work of vanity, not real aspiration for enlightenment. It is therefore counterproductive and blocks the way."

The presence of negative human characteristics, such as insincerity and self-importance, prevents the proper development of spirituality. The over-use of words like "God" or "Love" is actually an expression of vanity and self-conceit, as the level of the sacred is reduced to emotional or intellectual satisfaction. When pride and vanity penetrate into any religious or spiritual teaching they rob it of its inner developmental value. "Many religious people suffer from pride: taking pleasure and even delight in being good, or religious. In ordinary religious circles it is common for no real distinction to be made between spiritual people and the self-deceived."

Present-day cults are largely ineffective because they do not first address the unperceived vanity and disguised greed of their followers. There is an important saying that speaks to this: '*Humility has to precede instruction.*' The presence of vanity and self-importance in a pupil leads to the inability to distinguish genuine spiritual teachings from counterfeit ones.

Harmful human qualities such as greed and vanity are generally unperceived as such and may even be strengthened in the context of diluted spiritual systems and cults. "When the vanity and the emotional life have not been observed and understood, these will then attach themselves to the social life now termed 'spiritual' and we have the formula for the myriad cults which fill the earth."

It is usual for people to teach that greed is a bad thing; while blithely ignoring the demonstrable fact that greed for supposedly good things (say greed for knowledge or for sanctity) is still greed. And yet, of course, it is the greed itself which damages the person, not what it is supposedly trying to do. The result of ignoring the fact that certain attitudes are harmful is that these postures, such as greed, continue to take effect, to influence the individual, to prevent his learning, or progressing. You can observe for yourself how strong is, for instance, the vanity of people who are believed to be humble. (27)

It is generally believed that people performing rituals, ceremonies and exercises are doing so for laudable, even "holy" reasons, when in fact they may be acting out of concealed vanity and self-indulgence:

When prayer, rituals and ascetic life are just a means of self-indulgence, they are harmful rather than beneficial. This is quite obvious to people nowadays, when it is widely recognized that fixations are not the same as valuable and laudable observances. One should not pray if that prayer is vanity; rituals are wrong when they provide lower satisfactions, like emotional stimulus instead of enlightenment; he or she should not be an ascetic who is only enjoying it. (28)

Many seekers are preoccupied with their own personal growth and needs, to the detriment of real spiritual transformation. As Zen teacher Charlotte Beck reminds us: "Real spiritual practice is about opening ourselves so that this little "I" that wants and wants and wants and wants and wants, grows up. Growing up doesn't interest us very much."

"Personal growth" is often merely cosmetic change, like adding a chair to the living room. In true transformation, on the other hand, there is an implication that something genuinely new has come into being. It's as though what was there before has disappeared, and something different has taken its place. When I hear the word *transformation*, I think of those line drawings that look like a vase and then suddenly switch into a face. That's transformation. Zen practice is sometimes called the way of transformation. Many who enter Zen practice, however, are merely seeking incremental change: "I want to be happier." "I want to be less anxious." We hope that Zen practice will bring us these feelings. But if we are transformed, our life shifts to an entirely new basis . . . True transformation implies that even the aim of the "I" that wants to be happy is transformed. (29)

Members of cults who believe that the path they are following is 'special' or 'unique' are cut off by their own self-esteem from perceiving other teachings which are ultimately of much greater value. "If the sense of power of would-be students is fed by means of the suggestion that they are studying something that others do not know, they will get no further." Individuals who believe that they are enlightened or existing on a higher plane of consciousness and perception are usually deluded and, in fact, are suppressing the real spiritual side of themselves."

It is very easy for a group to turn into a power-system in order to gratify the desires of some to lead and others to follow. Many of those who try to run such groups lack the perception and objectivity to understand what 'progress' or 'growth' in spiritual studies really means. One of the causes of the fragmentation of true spiritual teachings is the assumption by half-mature disciples that they can set themselves up as 'teachers.' This is inevitably rooted in vanity, pride and self-importance.

Many members of cults often have doubts and uncertainty about the validity of the groups they are involved in, sensing that they are off the right path and that there is "something else." The teaching story of the *Monkey and the Apple* illustrates the predicament of seekers who are basically unfulfilled and sense that the way they are following is inadequate, but who are not willing to actually leave their present circumstance:

A Sufi story illustrates the predicament of people who belong to semi-mystical cults. A monkey sees a crab apple in a bottle. He reaches into the bottle and his hand closes over the apple. Now, because his hand has become a fist, he cannot get it out again. A man comes up and tries to tell the monkey to let go of the apple. The monkey, of course, refuses, because he thinks that is just a trick to steal his apple. He does not realize that, although he has nominal hold of the apple, it is of no use to him. On the contrary, it has half immobilized him. Now he only has one hand to grasp other food with; and he cannot swing from tree to tree. The followers of what we call "remnant cults" are like such a monkey. They hold what they have, but they do not have much of it. And they cannot even be sure that the apple which they hold is sweet. (30)

Conditioning of Belief and Behaviour

Researchers have verified the role of conditioning in modifying human behaviour and beliefs, and it is now accepted in scientific circles that many people can be (and are) conditioned to believe virtually anything. This knowledge, although unfamiliar to the ordinary person, is crucial in understanding the nature and attraction of cults.

The mechanisms of conditioning and indoctrination involve, to a large extent, the alternation of reward and punishment, of tension and relaxation, and repetition. The conditioning and manipulation that occurs, through the application of hope and fear, produces a state which has been compared to that of "a ball played from one part of a field to the other."

Promises and threats, reward and punishment, are useful only under certain circumstances: when, for example, dealing with immature individuals or communities. When applied to a more advanced community or individual, such methods are counter-productive and can often be harmful. "If we use these methods of fear and hope too strongly, we will actually regress the person to a more primitive condition even if he or she has already passed that stage; we

will not only be doing such a person no good, we will be doing damage to a person who is now trained to respond mainly to fear and hope.”

Learning systems which are based on conditioning and indoctrination attempt to narrow the perspective and confine the attention of their students. The power of conditioning produces an active force which creates a ‘bind’ or ‘knot’ in the human being, preventing higher perceptions and understanding. Such is the power of conditioning that even the most sublime thoughts and aspirations can become, through misuse or overuse, barriers or ‘veils’ to higher knowledge.

Many people value ideas, books, rituals, exercises or even other individuals strictly on the basis of implanted suggestion and imagination. It is essential, in the spiritual field (and elsewhere), to learn how to discriminate the difference between knowledge (*facts*) and beliefs and convictions (*conditioning*):

If I *know* that it is ten past ten in the morning, or that there is a fly on the wall, it is absolutely unnecessary, lunatic, even, to describe this as a belief. On the other hand, the people who believe that something is true do not know it in the same way. Why? Because if they knew it as a positive, objective fact they would not manifest any emotion about it: neither would they be so keen to make others believe it. All human experience shows that it is only things about which there is doubt which are believed in this characteristic manner. Facts, true ones, are not subject to either emotion or proselytizing. (31)

Research has shown that the majority of any group of people can be ‘trained’ or conditioned if the group is a random one and not selected on the basis of factors and characteristics which diminish the conditioning process. When group-members develop a comfortable belief-system they often have great difficulty giving up these beliefs due to the stability and reassurance such mental models provide for the group. One of the most powerful effects of the conditioning process is the pressure to conform to group norms or idealized behaviour:

All teachings, in their lower ranges, seek to teach people to adopt acceptable conduct and behaviour. Because of this emphasis upon conduct, misunderstandings arise very easily. People come to imagine that if they *seem* to be conforming, they are acceptable, or that they are progressing. The fact is, of course, that conformism is part of the civilizing of people. If they conform to the rules of the culture which surrounds them, larger numbers of people can associate together more easily. Strife is generally reduced. Communication between people becomes possible when, for instance, they are all not talking at once. It may be necessary to conform to certain kinds of expected behaviour in order to learn something. But when this conformism becomes the only, or major, characteristic of the people, the teaching has stopped taking effect. Instead of learning, we have practice: practice of conformism. (32)

Western religions and many metaphysical systems tend to emphasize unthinking conformity to an unexamined and preconceived model of so-called spiritual belief and behaviour:

- People who have strongly held religious beliefs are often sanctimonious, imagining that they alone are right or only their form of belief is correct.
- Service and sacrifice are both noble human expressions, but if they become obsessions they can actually be detrimental to spiritual growth.
- Certain important psychological attitudes, such as detachment, can easily be turned into inflexible principles, thought to be applicable in all circumstances and situations.
- Renunciation and asceticism can become perils of the spiritual path if they are the result of conditioned beliefs and expectations.
- Avoiding certain actions or behaviours in order to gain supposed merit may be a form of slavery to an inflexible dogma.
- Certain trance states of mind which are subjectively interpreted as 'contact with the Divine' can be produced or 'engineered' by implanted belief and suggestion.

Followers of Eastern religions are also susceptible to conditioning of beliefs and behaviours which they are not even aware of. Jean Klein, a respected teacher of Advaita Vedanta, relates an instructive story which speaks to this point:

I met some Tibetans who had a high function in certain Tibetan centers and we became very friendly in a very short time. They told me that some of their monks would be coming to Europe and they asked whether they could have my address. I gave them my address. They told me that these monks had realized absolute freedom, that they were really free. I said to them, it is marvellous that you send such friends to me. So the monks came to Paris and I showed them all the sights and we went to the wide avenue that goes to the Opera and, as you may know, there are many movie houses and theatres. I observed these men at several different moments and the most noticeable thing was that their sexuality was not at all integrated in them. They were completely disturbed by all the beautiful women who passed us. It was so striking for me that when we passed a movie house with posters of women almost undressed they were completely disturbed! So I thought, these people who are "completely free" are not absolutely free. (33)

Cults, with their narrow belief-system and repetitious practices and exercises, are largely based on the principles of classical conditioning, manipulation and indoctrination. Adherents are frozen at an early stage of development and their intuition and personal initiative stifled:

Q: Why do groups become automatized in this way?

A: There are two very good reasons. First, where the desire for reassurance and repetition is stronger than the desire for knowledge, rules and repetition become the most important factor. This occurs when people try to learn without proper

preparation. Proper preparation is to make sure that the people have a balanced mind into which to feed the seeds of knowledge . . . The second reason is that it is easier to organize and manipulate large numbers of people by using a small number of factors (exercises, beliefs, etc.), rather than by giving them proper individual attention. Consciously or otherwise, leaders of cults always seek the most effective means of mass organization. (34)

The powerful influence of conditioning underlying the formation and operation of a cult manifests in the form of authority-figures, an established hierarchy, commands and prohibitions. This provides a sense of order, structure and stability for the followers. "The desire for order and the haste to organize leads to a demand for over-simplification which causes teaching to become indoctrination, and meaningful activity to become ritual. It is difficult to reverse this process, and to reclaim flexibility because of a demand for order which is so powerful, as are many other lower-level aspirations, that it grips its victim like a disease." One further consequence of the conditioning process is that the group or organization is often stiff, overly serious and lacking any real sense of humour: "Sour-faced religionists find that humour disturbs the indoctrination which is all that they usually have to offer."

Almost everyone is vulnerable to the influence of the words and actions of authority figures and the prestige attached to many so-called religious or spiritual organizations. Few are willing to openly question the validity of the teachings and teachers:

When we join a spiritual group there is usually a host of activities, ceremonies, etiquettes, rituals, vows, and so forth that we are expected to participate in. There's no real freedom to choose whether to participate or not. Any hesitancy is equated with "ego," while participating in what is demanded in spite of doubts is called "lowering the mast of the ego." The mind quickly becomes conditioned to the new ceremonies and to the expected ways of relating to teachers, senior disciples, advanced students and beginners. In fact we have already been conditioned to these patterns at home, in school, at work, in church, and so forth. Now there is reinforcement of old patterns in a new place . . . So our heavy conditioning is perpetuated without any encouragement to question and doubt. On the contrary – doubting is "giving way to ego." (35)

Certain traditional spiritual teachings have maintained a practical knowledge of the role of conditioning in human life, and the methods by which to overcome this debilitating factor in spiritual studies. They avoid using conditioning methods with their students and stress the importance of identifying the presence of conditioning and indoctrination in any teaching situation. Western scientific researchers have also verified the role of conditioning in modifying human behaviour and beliefs, a knowledge which is crucial in understanding the nature and attraction of cults. This work has paved the way for a wider dissemination of this important knowledge of the power of conditioning in the contemporary world:

What remains to be done is that the general public should absorb the facts of mind-manipulation. Failure to do so has resulted in an almost free field for the cults which are the bane of Western existence. In both East and West, the slowness of the absorption of these facts has allowed narrow political, religious and faddish fanaticism to arise, grow and spread without the necessary 'immunization.' In illiberal societies it is forbidden to teach these facts. In liberal ones, few people are interested: but only because mind-manipulation is assumed to be something that happens to someone else. Yet the reality is that most people are touched by one or other of an immense range of conditioned beliefs, fixations even, which take the place of truth. (36)

Simplification and Fragmentation of Spiritual Teachings

One of the major indications of a metaphysical teaching gone sour is an undue emphasis on 'systematization' and organization of ideas at the expense of the totality of experience and a comprehensive development that involves more than just intellectual understanding. Multi-dimensional teachings can be modified and distorted by excessive organization, oversimplification and a need for 'reductionist symmetry' to such an extent that they are no longer effective. The phase in which a flexible and organic teaching becomes systematized through 'telescoping' and simplistic formulation indicates a deterioration of the original teaching:

When any part of a form of learning becomes available, it is standard procedure in the human community, almost compulsive behaviour, that people pick up pieces which appeal to them, for vocational or psychological reasons, and charge off in all directions (like Don Quixote) bearing these pieces, which they then elaborate, simplify and proclaim to be the whole thing, and something to be urgently transmitted to all and sundry. Spiritual studies are no exception to this. If you allow yourself to think, briefly, about what happens in familiar bodies of knowledge (say medicine, philosophy, social or even political ideas) you will see what I mean. The pattern is undeniable . . . This successive transition from the fine to the crude is characteristic of one way of the human handling of things, and there is little to be done about it. (37)

The oversimplification and reliance on a single formula or approach prevents progress in any field of learning, including the spiritual. Tools become chains when specific teachings and procedures, tailored for a given audience and employed as technical instruments under certain circumstances, become 'golden keys' applicable to all. The followers of cults are always looking for the single practice or 'magic wand' which will provide instant illumination.

Authentic spiritual teachings are comprehensive in nature and there is no need to "reinvent the wheel." They become functionally altered and 'warped' by selective and fragmentary handling of their ideas and practices:

Traditional usage of certain important materials in special teachings, the higher levels of what is known as religion, and in psychology, has produced methods of study and has used materials which cannot be improved upon. Unfortunately, in response to what operates in effect as a 'law' among humanity, these materials have become misused, misunderstood, frozen into symbol, ritual, emotional and intellectual usage. We have to reclaim the correct employment, the conscious use of objects, procedure, oration and exercise to rescue these things from mime, theatre and absurd fetishism . . . Some such ingredients have outlived their usefulness; some apply only to the culture in which they are projected. Others are among our most valuable possessions. Unless these facts are known and certain procedures practised in order to reclaim this heritage, no real study of the operation of the interior function of these elements can be made. (38)

The vestiges of spiritual teachings in the form of fragments of real knowledge and partial methodologies, removed from their original context and purpose, litter the earth. Here are some pertinent examples:

- Certain arrangements of words, such as prayers or litanies, are artefacts intended to be used as spiritual exercises. But due to the lack of knowledge of their proper use they "have become little more than incantations."
- Objects considered 'holy' or 'religious,' which have been created and devised for functional purposes related to one's inner life, have become conditioning instruments or even "fetishes."
- Symbols, rituals, ceremonies and clothing employed for specific purposes and occasions are imbued with emotional and associative significance.
- Sacred dances such as those of the 'whirling dervishes,' prescribed for certain cultures and times, have been turned into public spectacles.
- The ideas, practices and exercises of certain contemporary Fourth Way 'schools' which are inspired by Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, are applied indiscriminately to all comers without consideration of prior preparation and ability to benefit.
- In Subud, participants of the group exercise called the *latihan* open themselves and wait for certain experiences believed to be the working of God within. "Some are slightly affected, some profoundly, some not at all. But according to Sufi ideas and practice, it is precisely those who do not feel subjective states who may be the real candidates for the next stage. The gains of Subud are offset, at least in part, by the losses."

Another striking example of the misunderstanding of spiritual ideas is the transposition of the figurative and illustrative into the literal, as evidenced by the belief in the physical reality of so-called Yogic 'chakras.' Psychologist Robert Ornstein:

An extraordinary form of energy in the Yogic tradition is named *Kundalini*. This form of Yoga postulates seven centers (*chakras*) in the body, distributed from the root of the spine to the top of the head. In *Kundalini* Yoga, the aspirant attempts

to concentrate on these “centers” and to raise the “Kundalini energy” through them. This is held to be an extremely powerful and potentially destructive process, and many have afterwards found it almost impossible to regain normal consciousness. The Arabic fairy tales of a powerful “genie” locked in a bottle are warnings within these esoteric traditions about an unprepared opening up of energy or capacity. These *chakras*, or centers in the body, may actually be constructive visualizations or metaphors which have been taken somewhat too literally by some adherents. Considering them to be physical centers may be an instance of intuitive knowledge that has gone unchecked by the intellect. On the other side of the coin, an attempt to identify the *chakras* with physical points in the body’s anatomy, such as endocrine glands or autonomic ganglia, may be a very unfortunate confusion of metaphor with physical fact. (39)

Theoretical and overly cerebral approaches to spirituality can be misleading and even hazardous. “Words and concepts are like magic tricks -- unless you’ve seen what lies behind them they can bewilder you. In fact, on the level of words it is easy to confuse enlightenment with megalomania or narcissism.” In deteriorated teachings, sophisticated verbal arguments and the ability to play with words often substitute for real knowledge and understanding.

Indiscriminate study is ineffective, much like a goat nosing about and chewing on whatever it finds. Without discernment there can be no effective progress in spiritual studies beyond a certain point. Concentration upon certain ideas and practices to the exclusion of others produces a one-sided development in which the aspirant “leans on one side.” Authentic teachings follow the principles of ‘measure and proportion’ to avoid these pitfalls.

Undue emphasis on the attainment of certain states of mind, without the presence of other factors such as context and proper preparation, can lead the aspirant to ‘freeze’ or ‘crystallize’ at a lower stage of development:

Certain spiritual systems, possessed of a tradition of the overweening importance of detachment, but evidently lacking the means to monitor and assist progress towards it, are characterized by striving to enter and stay in a ‘non-desire’ state. The result is a large number of people in a quietist condition. They have not reached the stage of ability to detach, but the state of the inability to do anything else, which, rather than spiritual, is possible to describe as a conditioning in apathy. This condition comes about because the previous stages have not been successfully passed through. (40)

One of the root causes of the simplification of teachings lies in fixed mental patterns and unexamined assumptions on the part of both students and teachers alike. For instance, certain concepts and formulations may be employed in a teaching situation in order to guide students to a more advanced stage of knowledge at a later date. But when these ‘working hypotheses’ become valued for their own sake, and not as conductors to a further stage of understanding, they can act as ‘prisons’ preventing spiritual growth. The means become more valued than the

goal. "Things originally intended to be instruments become mere totems or symbols, bereft of dynamic function."

The habit of mixing bits and pieces of ideas, practices and exercises from different spiritual teachings is a common Western preoccupation which essentially leads nowhere. The different aspects of each inner teaching are not always compatible with other aspects or presentations, with the result that people often end up muddled and confused. "Truth is one but forms vary and cannot be amalgamated. These forms cannot be associated together because the forms date from various needs and epochs, and do not go together, any more than the wheel of a horse-carriage will fit a motor car."

Q: What is to prevent people from choosing the best ideas from all kinds of teachings, and adapting them?

A: What prevents ignorant people doing this is their incapacity. What prevents insightful ones is lack of necessity. People who know how to do it do not have to attempt it, because when one has this knowledge the activity is superfluous, because one then has access to the material which corresponds best to the time, place and people, without having to synthesize. Synthesizers are the half-ignorant. The amalgams of various teachings which are believed to provide new syntheses 'for modern man' are mere conglomerations of formulations which, by producing a kind of mixture, have altered the dynamic of all of them. The analogy might be with the assembling of pieces of formulae or equations or houses or instruments without understanding what part each fragment has had to play. The result may appear interesting, but it is ineffective. (41)

Real spiritual teachings are multi-dimensional and contain layer upon layer of meaning. The student cannot pass to a second level until the primary meaning has been correctly absorbed, a contention widely ignored by cults and other simplified systems. In order for spiritual practices to be effective, they must be prescribed and monitored by those with knowledge, experience and insight.

In their most fundamental sense, spiritual teachings are experiential and cannot be properly approached and studied in a rigid theoretical or intellectual manner. The viability of a teaching can actually be impaired by the accumulation of facts and information at the expense of personal experience and perception. Higher understanding in the spiritual realm is based on direct experience and not just words or theory. '*He who tastes knows*' is the injunction of the wise.

Real teachings of higher development are transmitted by a guide who has completed the spiritual journey and understands the importance of 'due proportion' in working with students. In order for spiritual practices to be effective they must be prescribed and monitored by someone with knowledge, experience and insight. Students themselves, by definition, cannot choose their own course of study based on reading or inclination:

Each seeker accepts, or invents, a method which suits him, applies it to himself with some earnestness and effort, obtains results according to his temperament and expectations, casts them into the mould of words, builds them into a system, establishes a tradition and begins to admit others into his 'school of Yoga.' It is all built on memory and imagination. No such school is valueless, nor indispensable, in each one can progress up to the point when all desire for progress must be abandoned to make further progress possible . . . The true teacher, however, will not imprison his disciple in a prescribed set of ideas, feelings and actions; on the contrary, he will show him patiently the need to be free from all ideas and set patterns of behaviour, to be vigilant and earnest and go with life wherever it takes him, not to enjoy or suffer, but to understand and learn. Under the right teacher the disciple learns to learn, not to remember and obey. *Satsang*, the company of the noble, does not mould, it liberates. Beware of all that makes you dependent. Most of the so-called 'surrender to the Guru' ends in disappointment, if not in tragedy. Fortunately an earnest seeker will disentangle himself in time, the wiser for the experience. (42)

Misuse of Spiritual Exercises

Although the world is flooded with a proliferation of spiritual exercises and methods from many different traditions, few people have the knowledge or insight to choose which are the most appropriate for them. A real teacher is necessary in order to do this. When people combine techniques from different teachings, the result of such hybrid experiments are usually worthless from an inner developmental perspective.

Many of the rituals, movements and dances, music, recitations and exercises associated with contemporary religions are the partial remnants of a comprehensive teaching and knowledge of inner development which has been reduced to the level of ceremony, spectacle or superficial entertainment. The popularization of spiritual exercises, and their attendant widespread usage by unprepared students, is a distortion of their real purpose and efficacy. When spiritual exercises are used for lower-level purposes of a physical or emotional nature, it robs them of their higher developmental potential:

If certain physical and mental exercises are practised by people who use things for emotional, social or callisthenic purposes, they will not operate on a higher level with such people. They become merely a means of getting rid of surplus energy, or of assuaging a sense of frustration. The practitioners, however, will almost invariably mistake their subjective experiences of them for 'something higher.' (43)

People who experiment haphazardly with random exercises and techniques taken out of proper context are usually only amusing themselves, possibly harmlessly but sometimes with

serious negative consequences. Teachers from many spiritual traditions have always warned against the indiscriminate use of exercises which, like medicine, must be prescribed with expert guidance for specific circumstances and applied in due measure to be effective.

Simplified systems condition their adherents through repetitive practices which create a sense of spiritual attainment without actually producing it. "In the development of the human mind, there is a constant change and limit to the usefulness of any particular technique." Cults either offer one special technique (such as concentrative meditation) or else a synthesis or amalgam of methods drawn from many disparate sources:

As we encounter them today, the ancient esoteric traditions are accidental conglomerations of useful techniques and outmoded cultural trappings. In such an atmosphere, a reduced form of meditation can be mass-merchandized. And for many, their entire association with the techniques of meditation has been with the most rudimentary and minor form, that of a concentrative repetition, divorced from any other techniques that are organically associated with it. It is like learning how to spell, without ever learning how to read. (44)

Cults tend to treat everyone in their organization the same way. In authentic schools of higher development the teacher chooses appropriate methods in accordance with a knowledge and intuition of what will work for each individual. One of the consequences of ignoring individual differences in the makeup of a group is the tendency to apply the same standardized exercises for everyone:

Q: Some groups carry out frequent and regular exercises, 'dances,' and all sorts of activities in which everyone takes part. Why do you say that one should not do the things which have brought others into high spiritual states?

A: I can only repeat that what suits one person at one time does *not* inevitably suit another. Why should one not do things which have brought others into high spiritual states, the questioner asks? If one were a machine, and if all people and situations were alike, if people were pieces of wood to be shaped: of course one should neglect all the manifold attendant circumstances and apply exercises randomly. This question implies that everything is always the same. By turning the matter over in one's mind, the question might become: 'Under what circumstances would it be true that random exercises should not be carried out, or mechanical imitation should be shunned?' One very good reason not to 'steal' exercises and apply them randomly (which means without insight and knowledge) is that this can have the same sort of effect, in its own sphere, as other, more familiar forms of 'theft.' (45)

Certain spiritual exercises are designed to be carried out with selected students at specific times and in a special order. But cults inevitably apply exercises to large numbers of people irrespective of "when, where, and with whom."

One group may find that a certain technique works well in a given situation, be it relaxation, concentration, or movement. Its members may tend to apply the technique in situations or with people for whom it is inappropriate. Because the technique works for them, they come to believe that it *ought* to work for everyone at all times. The technique becomes the end and may become an obsession. Those who are involved in using such a technique – whether it is a particular meditation technique, a certain breathing exercise, or a training procedure – can become fixated and restricted to what the technique can offer. The adherents may set up schools to teach the “sacred” ritual, forgetting that each technique has its relevance only for a certain community at a certain time. (46)

Deteriorated teachings typically concentrate on a limited range of exercises and methods while comprehensive teachings utilize a wide range of practices, regarding every “movement, posture, thought or impact” as significant in human inner development. Cults also ignore the fact that certain exercises, observances and studies are intended to be carried out only for limited periods and specific reasons by certain individuals or groups. They are not applicable in all circumstances. “For example, if people are encouraged to pray without certain elements (preparation, attunement), their prayers may become a psychotherapeutic tool, immensely valuable, but nonetheless at a lower level than its optimum function.”

There are many specific examples of how spiritual exercises and techniques, drawn from many different traditions and countries, can be misused:

- Yoga postures (*asanas*) and breathing exercises (*pranayama*) are taken out of context from their original employment as part of a comprehensive system of inner development and used mainly for physical culture and reduction of stress.
- The repetition of words or phrases (*mantras*) are used in genuine schools as carefully applied instrumental tools, but have devolved into ‘magical chants’ or emotionally arousing forms of auto-intoxication when incorrectly employed by cults.
- The control of attention is an essential component of many traditional spiritual teachings, but has been misused in contemporary times and become almost an obsession with some, who fixate on this concept while ignoring the broader context of suitable time, company, circumstance and necessity in its application.
- The effects of many of the concentration and meditation techniques imported from the East have been demonstrated by researchers to be the product of suggestion and the induction of auto-hypnotic states. “At best, these exercises are capable of providing some momentary relaxation and reduction of stress, nothing much more. Reports by endless scores of students that such techniques have ‘changed my life’ or ‘given me spiritual bliss’ are more reflective of their own naiveté and over-suggestibility than anything else.”
- Sacred music exists in many religious traditions throughout the world and in certain schools is employed to access higher states of consciousness. But unless the listeners

are correctly prepared and attuned, and the time and circumstances are correct, music can create undesirable emotional states that are the product of conditioning and crude pleasure-seeking.

- Dance and rhythmic movements, when engaged in indiscriminately and without proper knowledge of when, where and why they should be performed, may actually be harmful and detrimental to real spiritual growth.
- The use of powerful ecstasy-producing methods (including drugs) to facilitate altered states of consciousness can be dangerous when proper safeguards are not in place. This type of 'experimental mysticism' can interfere with sensitive aspects and capacities of the mind and produce unforeseen effects: "This follows a common pattern in enthusiasts when the production of an altered condition of mind becomes an end and not a means properly controlled by a specialist."

Some form of meditation plays a central role in virtually every spiritual tradition. Most meditation techniques produce short-term beneficial effects such as relaxation or a sense of well-being but are not complete. Meditation has many different levels and degrees and can easily become a reservoir of expectation, obsession and programmed conditioning: "Meditation gives some sort of calmness. But it is only a preparatory step, and gives calmness only as a 'signpost.' When the calmness has been attained some people become addicted to it, and their progress is frozen at that point. They have become meditation-addicts."

There are specific signs which distinguish the skilful use of meditation as a vehicle of insight and transformation from cultish uses:

While Zen Buddhism traditionally used meditation of various sorts in their arts of mind cultivation, original Zen and imitation Zen cultism may be distinguished by comparison of specific attitudes toward meditation. Zen that is exaggerated into a meditation cult, in which meditation assumes the status of a value in itself, or attention is fixated on a given posture or procedure presented as inherently sacrosanct, is a characteristic deterioration. This is more of the nature of fetishism than enlightenment, as is particularly evident in cases where meditation is done ritualistically in random groups according to fixed schedules, even under pressure; such activity results in obsession, not liberation. (47)

Some of the notable indications of the misuse of meditation include:

- Teachings which require practitioners to endure long hours of pain and discomfort in cross-legged sitting sessions in order to gain a breakthrough to a supposed higher state of consciousness are trying, almost like a pressure cooker, to force spiritual growth.
- Sitting in groups composed of the same people over a long period of time and isolated from the larger community is limiting and self-centered, and draws practitioners away from "our natural connection with all people, all beings, and Life at large."

- Intensive meditation retreats unconsciously appeal to greed and the desire for instantaneous results.
- Deepening concentration without a parallel growth of insight and understanding can actually harden the shell of the ego rather than softening it.
- Meditation can easily become a self-centered pursuit – “I want,” “I need” – reinforcing the sense of a separate self and ignoring others who are not engaged in the same type of activities.

‘Veiling’ the Truth

Certain spiritual traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and others, point directly to the one ultimate, unchanging Reality which is the ground of all experience yet is obscured by our identification with the ever-changing stream of subjective thoughts, feelings and perceptions. From this ‘veiling’ there arises the sense of a separate self or ego which then seeks spiritual teachings which purport to fulfil the longing for wholeness and spiritual realization. But the vehicle or means can easily be mistaken for the destination. Ramana Maharshi: “Fortunate are those who do not lose themselves in the labyrinth of philosophy, but go directly to the Source from which they all arise.”

The Ultimate Truth is so simple. It is nothing more than being in the original, pristine state. This is all that needs be said. Still, it is a wonder that to teach this simple Truth there should come into being so many religions, creeds and methods, and the disputes that arise among them. Oh the pity! Oh the pity!
(48)

From this perspective the world’s spiritual traditions are seen as signposts on the Way, but not themselves the ultimate goal: “The sacred lore is voluminous, different parts of it being adapted to the needs of different kinds of seekers; each seeker successively transcends portions of it, until ultimately he or she transcends the whole of it.”

Q: How are the conflicting views of people of different religions to be reconciled?

A: The real aim of all religions is to lead up to the awakening to the Truth of the Self. But the Truth of the Self is too simple for the generality of people; even though there is no one who is not aware of the Self, people do not care to be told of it; they think the Self to be of little worth; they want to hear of far-off things – heaven, hell, reincarnation and so on; they love mystery, and not the plain truth; and the religions humour them, so that ultimately they may come back to the Self. But why not seek and find and abide in the Self at once, without further wandering? The heaven cannot be apart from the one that sees or thinks of them; their reality is of the same degree as that of the ego that wants to go there; hence they do not exist apart from the Self, which is the real heaven. (49)

Methods which promise to guide the aspirant to self-realization have an almost hypnotic influence in which the 'means' become venerated at the expense of the 'ends.' They no longer function effectively as a vehicle for awakening to our true nature:

To show the moon, we make use of the finger; but we must not confuse the finger and the moon, because the finger is not the moon. *Skillful means* are things created with the intention of guiding people in their efforts toward Awakening. If these means are taken as ends, that is to say, as the description of Awakening or as Awakening itself, they cannot play their useful role; on the contrary, they become a sort of permanent prison. (50)

The lure of spiritual teachings to explain the nature of the world to us is almost irresistible, yet we are left with the sense that they do not capture the essence and true reality of existence, which is ultimately a mystery beyond intellectual comprehension and understanding. In the words of Toni Packer: "To be alive, fully alive, means flowing without hindrance – a vulnerable flow of aliveness with no resistance. Without any sense of passing time. Without needing to think of 'myself' – what I am, what I will be."

We propagate what we think we know. It is safe. But truth cannot be known. It is as simple as that. Insight, truth, clarity, enlightenment – whatever word you may give to what is unnameable – is not the effect of any cause. It has no method, no training. It has nothing to do with the conditioned, trained mind. So why condition people's minds by saying: "Do this practice in order to attain enlightenment." We all want clarity and safety and wonderful experiences because we feel so utterly empty, insecure, and afraid. As long as we are afraid and wanting, we are totally vulnerable to ever-new programs and exploitation. (51)

Real spiritual teachings are expedients for the purpose of breaking through self-imposed barriers to realization. "Be empty inside while harmonizing with the environment and you will be at peace even in the midst of busy activity in the world." And, "First go to the beyond, to know that It exists; then come back to the here and now to act."

Mature spiritual teachings strive to reveal the aspirant's true nature by placing a mirror before them: "Keep a mind that is clear like a mirror: when red comes, the mirror becomes red; when white comes, white. You reflect the universe exactly as it is." In Advaita Vedanta this reality is the final destination: "All are faced with the fact of their own existence. 'I am' is the ultimate fact: 'Who am I?' is the ultimate question to which everybody must find their own answer."

Whatever is seen and perceived is continuously in a state of creation and destruction, but You in your true nature are unborn and indestructible. Unless you realize your true nature, there will be no peace for you. No matter how much you strive to acquire any worldly gains, they are bound to go; so also your con-

cepts and various identities. Even if you follow any religion in the hope of obtaining something permanent from the outside, you will be sorely disappointed. The main purpose of true spirituality is to liberate oneself completely from one's concepts and conditionings. By following any religion, cult or creed, one becomes inevitably conditioned, because one is obliged to conform and accept its disciplines, both physical and mental. One may get a little peace for some time, but such a peace will not last long. In your true nature, you are the knower of concepts and therefore prior to them. (52)

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