

SPIRITUAL WRITINGS

*'Become acquainted with your own book. Learn
how to read it, how to let it tell you its story.'*
Jean Klein

Relative Importance of Books

A great deal of the spirit and wisdom of inner teachings can be transmitted in written form. Spiritual literature has an important role in providing basic information about the Path and can instill a foundation of knowledge that helps students in their own personal journey. Books and texts emanating from an authentic source provide a 'compass' to guide the seeker on his or her spiritual quest and have a specific teaching function:

Books are by no means inanimate objects. They are textbooks to be looked at, to be followed, to be understood and above all to be used. People writing these works did not spend their entire lives in order to display their intellectual abilities or their poetic capacities. Their function was to teach and to write, and they did both for the benefit of people who would follow in the Tradition after them . . . Books which have meaning in the Tradition are crafted for a specific function. They are very carefully written, step by step, and they are relating both forward and backward. If you get into harmony with the text, into harmony with the intention of the author, then it lifts you beyond the level of the mere black and white of the printing. (1)

In almost all spiritual traditions, books, literature, myths, fables, poetry, aphorisms and other written forms play a significant role in both preparatory work and the transmission of inner teachings of human development. "A book is valuable to its reader provided he or she is more ignorant than its author."

Q: What is the value of spiritual books?

A: In the attentive and thoughtful reader they will ripen and bring out flowers and fruits. Words based on truth, if fully tested, have their own power . . . They help in dispelling ignorance. They are useful in the beginning, but become a hindrance in the end. One must know when to discard them. (2)

Certain books and writings are invaluable at specific stages of the spiritual journey. Zen teacher Maurine Stuart: "We need to read. There are many wonderful books that can inspire us. People don't read enough. They think there's something wrong with reading, that it's not good for their practice. That's ridiculous. Reading is very helpful, very inspiring."

Q: What sort of books are best to read when you want to live a spiritual life?

A: Emerson said: "That book is good which puts me in a working mood." If you want to realize your True-nature – and not merely speculate about it – that book is good which has the deep ring of truth discovered through personal experience. The good book stirs the heart, fires the imagination, and leads to the resolve to let nothing stand in the way of full awakening. (3)

Many spiritual teachers have used books in their own spiritual practice as a means of clarification and discernment. "A book carries the transmission of the consciousness or presence of its author. It is not just the words; it is the being who utters the words."

Reading has also been a very important part of my journey, too. I used books to help me flush things out in my own mind. They helped me become clear about certain things. In that sense I think that the intellectual side of spirituality, which is often downplayed and for good reason, is at times also undervalued. Although you can't find the truth in a book, books are sometimes the way we connect certain dots in our heads and in our hearts. Sometimes books can open us in really significant ways . . . If you hit the right book at the right time, it can spark a recognition. (4)

Although books are not sufficient in themselves to engender spiritual enlightenment, they are nevertheless invaluable in helping the student progress along the Path. Those who reject books out of hand do so on the basis of incomplete knowledge. The value of books and other writings cannot be perceived at an early stage of spiritual development. There is a saying: '*Premature independence is the daughter of conceit.*' One of the great heritages of traditional spiritual teachings is the unaltered transmission of important books and texts:

If you have continuity in a teaching, each successive generation benefits to a greater extent from the activities of the generation before in that they have hopefully absorbed energy, knowledge and teaching techniques from something like the Tradition, and have passed it on to their children in the form of a teaching, a knowledge, a behaviour, a contact. It becomes all the more valuable when continuity is based on incontrovertible, unedited, uninterrupted books. The writings of the various great masters have been set down and have come to us unaltered through the centuries . . . The content of these writings were very carefully guarded within the Tradition. They were known to a relatively large number of people, so any misinterpretation which might occur as a result of a mistranslation or a bad copy could very quickly be corrected. (5)

The literature of a viable spiritual tradition, while vital, is not in itself sacred in the deepest sense. In the words of the Sufi adept Tayfuri: '*Sacred is that which cannot be destroyed.*' A similar perspective is found in Zen Buddhism. D.T. Suzuki writes: "With Zen followers, all literature was like a finger pointing to the moon, and there was not much in itself that will actually

lead one to the seeing of one's own inner nature; for this seeing was a realization which must be attained by one's own personal efforts apart from the mere understanding of letters . . . Literature is helpful only when it indicates the way, it is not the thing itself."

The importance, and also the limits, of books and writings must be understood by the seeker in order for spiritual progress to develop properly. "Books are beautiful and inspiring. Lectures may help us. Scriptures are also important, but these are not enough. It's living practice that is most essential." Thomas Merton addressed this point in his *Mystics and Zen Masters*:

The Zen monks traditionally preferred direct experience to abstract and theoretical knowledge gained by reading and study. But of course they never denied that reading and study could, in their proper place, contribute to the validity of their spiritual training. The harm comes from placing one's whole trust in books and in learning, and neglecting the direct grasp of life which is had only by living it in all its existential reality . . . Since attachment even to the teaching of Buddha himself could produce spiritual blindness, the Zen masters were very careful to prevent any disciple from becoming attached to their teaching. That is why so many of the sayings of the Zen masters seem to us to be pure nonsense. They were often, in fact, deliberately meaningless from a logical viewpoint. The Zen masters did not want disciples simply to memorize something they had said. Yet, paradoxically, Zen literature consists of almost nothing but quotations of the Zen masters! (6)

The great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi also emphasized the limited role of books in the quest for self-realization:

Q: Is the study of [spiritual writings] helpful for liberation?

A: Very little. Some knowledge is needed for Yoga and it may be found in books. But practical application is the thing needed, and personal example, personal touch and personal instructions are the most helpful aids. A person may laboriously convince himself of the truth to be intuited, i.e. its function and nature, but the actual intuition is akin to feeling and requires practice and personal contact. Mere book learning is not of any great use. After realization all intellectual loads are useless burdens and are thrown overboard as jetsam (7)

Educational and Instrumental Function

One of the most important functions of spiritual literature is preparing and laying the groundwork for future development. The sacred texts of the world's great spiritual traditions are rich in instructional material for those who can recognize their inner developmental content:

Note these three kinds of literature: The first is factual literature, whose intention is to provide factual information. The second is ephemeral literature, whose main function is to entertain. The third is specific literature, designed to help develop capacities in a certain readership. Literature which entertains may contain teaching materials as well. (8)

There is a great deal of ancient written material which are still of value to contemporary cultures. However, it is important to realize that an authentic spiritual teaching is relevant and useful for a given community based on the suitability of 'time, place and people.' For this reason it is systematized only for limited or transitory periods, and is constantly updated as circumstances change.

In a teaching setting, books are part of a comprehensive educational program that is guided by a spiritual teacher who ensures that they are used correctly. "Your studies must be composed of the right proportion of a number of elements. Books are both essential at the present stage and also only a part." The student must employ written study materials in the right manner and at the right time in order to derive the inner 'nutrients' inherent in them.

Books and texts are recommended by a teacher because they have an instrumental teaching value for an individual or group. This literature has a catalytic function which operates to provoke experiences and capacities for learning in the student. The role of spiritual writings is to act upon the mind so that a greater understanding develops "through the interaction of written materials and inner cognition." The primary value of this literature is the effect it can have as an instrument of experience and awakening.

The instrumental and developmental content in books and texts can relate directly to the reader's psychological state, influencing their thoughts and actions in a positive way. Material of this nature is capable of provoking thought and directing the student to a point where consciousness can operate on a higher level. "Things which have been read leave a trace. This trace, not necessarily consciously registered by the reader, can be digested into another area where higher perceptions are operating."

One purpose of these instrumental writings is to apply a shock designed to 'strike' the reader in such a fashion that the mind begins to operate in a new and different manner. A technique used in some writings is to shift attention from the expected to the unexpected, in order to highlight the power of assumptions and preconceptions. Other techniques are employed in books to produce a certain foreseen effect on the student. These include "leaving things out, emphasizing points with no obvious relevance and breaking off the writing when the reader anticipates a resolution."

One of the functions of spiritual literature, inherent in their design and content, is to develop a more comprehensive awareness of oneself and the world, and to establish and maintain a fresh way of looking at and understanding patterns of human behaviour.

Spiritual books and writings are designed to connect with a person's actual experience and life situation. One of their functions is to illustrate the workings of the human mind, illuminate mental and emotional patterns and make use of experiences which we might otherwise miss. Another of their purposes is to enable the reader to think more clearly and to demonstrate "the limitations of formal logic and the ease of falling into false reasoning." Many spiritual books are in fact exercises to free the mind from the adhesions of rigid thinking, sometimes by stimulating thought, sometimes by the method of arousing healthy criticism.

The inner effect of spiritual writings may not be readily apparent or yield immediate results. The passage of time and the impact of certain experiences may be necessary first. A teacher will not necessarily provide explanations or interpret the meaning of prescribed literature, preferring to let students make their own efforts to understand. However, with certain types of literature, explanation and interpretation may be needed to unlock the inner dimensions contained within the words.

The way in which books are studied determines the quality of 'nutrition' that can be extracted from them. Books are useful provided one knows how to use them. Spiritual literature is designed to be read slowly, carefully and with attention. "The application of attention is the magical act which transforms print and paper into bread and wine."

Q: Why is it that so many people read so much and yet are not changed by it?

A: To learn something, you may have to be exposed to it many times, perhaps from different perspectives; and you will also have to give it the kind of attention which will enable you to learn. In our experience, people fail to learn from books for the same reason that they do not learn other things – they read selectively. The things that touch them emotionally, or which they like or are thrilled by, they will remember or seek in greater quantity or depth . . . Reading does not change people unless they are ready to change. Rumi said: "You have seen the mountain, but you have not seen the mine inside the mountain." Just because a book is available, even one of the very greatest books, does not mean that one can, or perhaps should, try to learn correctly from it at any given moment. Arbitrary study does not always yield results. (9)

Underlying Design and Pattern

The Teaching itself determines its mode of presentation and provides the knowledge of how its ideas and methods are to be projected in written form. Spiritual literature does not necessarily follow a conventional pattern. Rather, it is based on the knowledge of 'the design of truth' operating on a higher spiritual level known to teachers of the Tradition. To be effective, spiritual writings must be employed in the proper manner following the overall plan or pattern which unlocks the "treasures of this extraordinary storehouse."

Here are a few characteristics of Sufi literature (10):

- Some books, some passages, are intended to be read in a certain order.
- Some books and passages have to be read under specific environmental conditions.
- Some have to be read aloud, some silently, some alone, some in company.
- Some are of limited use or ephemeral function, being addressed to communities in certain places, at certain stages of development, or for a limited time.
- Some forms have concealed meanings which yield coherent but misleading meanings, safety-devices to ward off tamperers.
- Some are interlaced with material deliberately designed to confuse or sidetrack those who are not properly instructed, for their own protection.
- Some books contain a completely different potential, and they communicate through another means than the writing contained in them. They are not designed primarily to be read at all.

Traditional spiritual writings employed in esoteric schools have a much greater depth and range than most people realize. Certain spiritual literature contains material and ideas which are ahead of their time and which become comprehensible "only when 'new' psychological and even scientific technical discoveries are made and become well known." And, a sacred text or book may have an influence upon the reader that is not suspected.

It is claimed that some books may exercise functions which most cultures would not ascribe to books. The real purpose and function of certain books and the conditions under which their potential may be unlocked, is not part of the knowledge of most contemporary cultures. "The idea, for instance, that a book is designed to be read under certain circumstances, or at different stages of development, is not well known to current cultures. Books of real developmental value can be read only under their own conditions. The teacher explains the way in which the book is to be read, and other things necessary for the current position of the student."

Q: Can you tell me something about the dervish literature which is available in English? Which books should one read?

A: Many books have been translated. In order to profit by them, even the translation, you have to know something about them which is rarely expressed; and you also have to be in the correct state. The thing you have to know is that they are often not literature at all as commonly understood in other spheres. They are constructed to fulfil a multiple purpose. Academicians have treated them as literature, source material for facts, expositions of doctrine. This can really only be done by people who know what and when to extract from them. As to the timing of their study, the nourishment depends upon the situation of the learner. The only way to get to grips with this literature and to profit by it in a useful sense

is to study it as it is intended to be studied; as a part of a comprehensive plan, in ways, at times and under conditions suited to its study. Otherwise it might be likened to seeing a colour television transmission on a black and white screen. You get some impression, useful in some ways, varying in impact according to the extent to which the monochrome can reproduce what is originally intended to be in full colour. Some people have soaked themselves in this literature; they have profited more or less, but always remember that it is possible to profit less, as well as to profit more, through the effort exercised. You can even lose by such an enterprise. (11)

Traditional spiritual literature is carefully written by specialists with a wide and long experience with the written word. Such writings must be studied in a special manner to yield any real benefit. The way a book is approached and studied greatly influences the progress of the learner. Without proper preparation students may “reject the book, read it selectively, or else indoctrinate themselves with the contents – all these results are undesirable.”

All material connected with the Work can be understood at different levels. The material has to be studied, not from different points of view, but in different ways. Example: Study the material (1) for its obvious content or factual meaning. Then (2) for where it relates to you, and how you make mistakes in thinking which could be corrected by the material. Then (3) for what it may communicate to you outside of these two fields. Try to realize that this material is not a formal exposition alone, but contains elements which will help you to understand it in a deeper sense. (12)

A certain technical knowledge is required in order to use spiritual books and texts in the manner in which they were designed and intended to be used. The Sufi author and teacher Idries Shah discusses this in detail in “Eight Points on Initiatory Literature” (13):

Few experiences are so ludicrous as when one sees people gravely intoning literature without knowing which passages to use and which to exclude:

- Many vital books contain parts which, like a safety-catch, actually prevent the meaning from functioning if they fall into incapable hands. When, therefore, people seek the ‘key’ to special literature, they do not realize that the door is locked and the key is in it. The key operates by removing it, not by any other method.
- Classical initiatory literature, again, contains material for various kinds of people, useful at different times. To devour all the literature without knowing this, and without being able to select or prescribe essential passages, is next to useless. Depending upon the chance choices made, such omnivorous study may actually be harmful.
- Selecting similar passages from different books or different schools is hazardous and at best a waste of effort. Anthologists and other superficial students, what-

ever motives they may think they have, engage in this activity because they really prefer the similarities of associative materials.

- Some passages in higher literature are enciphered. This is done for a variety of reasons, the main one *not* being as a challenge to individual students to try to penetrate their secrets.
- Specialists in higher literature perfected, aeons ago, all the methods of using words so that their books would fulfil several functions (instructional, informational, cultural) on different levels. Remember that you cannot perceive the various levels until you are ready, and no simple 'key' will be of any use. This is particularly important for protective purposes. You may have been born and brought up in a single room, as it were. If you were let out while lacking the means to survive in the outside world, you would probably perish.
- Literature which is seemingly esoteric is often not such at all, but is designed for another purpose. This purpose may well not be one which you can further. You therefore need expert guidance in this matter.
- Much literature which has no apparently esoteric significance or intent, on the other hand, belongs to the higher domain. If you cannot recognize it, you are in need of guidance.
- Much higher literature is of no developmental value if studied by itself and depends for its effect upon certain experimental conditions and experiences through sources other than the eyes or ears. If you do not know this, you are in need of guidance.

Suitability of 'Time, Place and People'

Certain texts or specific passages of books are held to be useful for teaching purposes only for a limited time. Some written materials are intended for special communities, at special times, or under special circumstances. For instance, in authentic schools of higher development, ideas expressed in written form are confined to the people, time and occasion where they have the most beneficial effect, since writings vary in the effect on the reader in accordance with the conditions under which they are studied.

Spiritual books may only apply to specific circumstances and may even seem to contradict one another. Circumstances alter cases, so that teachings may apply at one time but not another time or for another person or persons. Differences in terminology or descriptions of ideas found in books, which seem contradictory, may be due to the fact that they were written at different times for the use of different communities.

Because written materials used in schools of higher development are chosen because of their effectiveness and application to a specific audience, time and circumstance, there can never be such a thing as a general, standardized "textbook of mysticism" that applies to all: "There is no book which can tell one, as in an A to Z directory, exactly what reality exists in what

circumstance, because circumstances change, the person changes, impacts change, and the needed terminology changes as well.”

Different texts and readings are appropriate at different stages of an individual’s spiritual development. As they advance, students can learn to develop a “feel” for what books or passages to read at a given time in order to harmonize with their inner state. A genuine esoteric school will carefully choose which written materials apply to which community at a specific time and set of circumstances:

There are two criteria: (1) what materials have to be projected at the present time to have the maximum useful effect, and (2) who can absorb them and in what format. Written materials are always presented in accordance with the possibilities . . . Eastern similes which are still viable both in the East and the West are used because of this viability. Superseded materials are not regurgitated just because they have been used in former times. Materials are re-presented if this can be usefully done. ‘Western’ psychological terminology and insights are useful, so they are used. (14)

Any authentic current projection of the Teaching will use the language and idiom of contemporary cultures in its form and presentation:

In our present study courses, we use:

- (1) Material drawn from earlier teachings, which have not been corrupted, and which still have validity in the culture whose members we are addressing.
- (2) Material from past teachings, which are not fully preserved in literature, but of which indications remain. We expand and explain these, and sometimes illustrate them from literature and oral traditions.
- (3) Materials which belong to the teaching, but which have to be expressed in a form suitable to the audience being addressed, the time and the place. Some of these appear strange, unusual, even contradictory. They are selectively drawn from the huge stock which is itself based upon a knowledge of the design of truth on another level. (15)

Multiple Levels of Meaning

Certain books of spiritual significance are characterized by a wide range of diverse materials: fables, teaching tales, humour, narrative, proverbs and aphorisms, psychological exercises, meditations and contemplation themes, to mention a few. “The experiential effect of these modalities are equally as diverse: laughter, amusement, beauty, entertainment, insight, perception and learning.”

Books may instruct on different levels, ranging from the factual to the allegorical to beyond. Literature which contains multiple dimensions has a versatility that protects it from predictable responses, over-simplification and banality. A useful analogy for the multiple levels and uses of certain spiritual literature is a fruit that has colour, taste, shape, seeds and so on. This relates to the different levels of understanding in books, corresponding to psychological, spiritual and other elements.

Some books are modelled on the 'scatter' technique of multiple activity and composite impact. For example, Rumi's masterpiece *The Mathnawi* is a mixture of stories, fables, poems, examples and speculations in which "a picture is built up by multiple impact to infuse into the mind the Sufi message." In more contemporary times, *The Sufis* by Idries Shah, although on the surface a conventional book, also follows the 'scatter' pattern:

Looked at closely it is a combination of ideas, facts, data and writing styles which become a series of exercises for the reader as well as a source of content. The book is a source of information, it is also a sample of the way in which Sufi material can be taught; each chapter has deliberate interior rhythm which is aligned with the particular type of information in it. (16)

One of the characteristics of esoteric literature is the expression of multiple meanings and functions. For instance, it has been stated that every passage in the Koran has seven meanings, applicable to the developmental state of the reader or listener. Different types of people will have different subjective reactions to the range and variety of literature emanating from a conscious teaching source.

A spiritual book may be constructed with different perspectives and various levels of interpretation of the same material. Certain passages and sections of text may lend themselves to a number of different interpretations which yield very subtle meanings. Certain classical works of literature, such as Hakim Sanai's *The Walled Garden of Truth*, are composed in such a manner. For many passages, several readings and interpretations are possible. This is said to effect a shift in perceptions or a change in focus and perspective. In some cases, spiritual literature may contain several different meanings which sometimes appear contradictory. This apparent inconsistency is designed to stimulate, through 'shock,' the human mind.

In schools of higher knowledge the successive layers of meaning contained in esoteric literature are unlocked, as new dimensions become apparent. "First the exterior meaning is absorbed, then the secondary meaning. This tension between the two levels can lead to the ability to see further ranges of significance, until the stage may be reached when we find understanding beyond verbalization." A book may also contain elements which only seem to come together when the reading is finished, yielding a perspective rich in depth and meaning. By constant reading of assigned texts, the different levels of meaning can be gradually absorbed by the inner self.

Symbolic and Allegorical Writings

Many spiritual writings are allegorical, analogical and symbolic. They can transport the mind into a realm where higher knowledge can be accessed, revealing the inner meanings and metaphorical significance of perennial spiritual truths. Many allegories describe specific stages in human spiritual development. The theme of a "journey," "quest" or "search" is often used as an analogy to describe this process of inner transformation.

A properly used analogy or metaphor can enable a person to identify and study common human behaviour patterns and characteristics that block higher perceptions and understanding. To be useful, analogies and metaphors must be applied skilfully in the right manner:

Metaphors are most useful for fixing, for a time, in the mind, concepts which otherwise have too fleeting a life to be of practical use. When people use metaphors to illustrate situations and induce others to take them literally, or take them too far, we get the fossilization of doctrine and consequent loss of understanding. If I say, for example: 'Man is like the sea, with his emotions ebbing and flowing' I have to qualify this and harvest the value of the metaphor as soon as possible. The alternative is that people might start to imagine that man is like the sea in a far-reaching and complicated analogical system. They then tend to spend their time looking for as many correspondences as possible between man and sea. Our use of metaphors is designed to supply the minimum impression. The hearer must not try to elaborate too far. (17)

Wise sayings and aphorisms are often studied in esoteric schools for their encapsulated wisdom: "Aphorisms, when they emanate from a source of knowledge and teaching, are not only entertaining and insightful; they widen the perspective, so that the individual can better see his or her previous limitations, and hence overcome them." Certain forms of spiritual writing bypass the logical, rational intellect and awaken the non-verbal, intuitive aspects of the mind:

All religious teachings use parables, symbols, stories and metaphors as teaching devices. Christ talks about sheep, seeds, fishing, and so on. The Sufis have stories about Mulla Nasrudin, and the Hindus stories about Krishna. Western occultism is full of symbolism. All these stories and symbols propel you into a non-literal, non-logical realm, the intermediate realm of the mirror and its reflection, silence and sound. However, when working with these instruments, in addition to being propelled into a non-literal, non-logical realm, you must also work from the awakened state. Where are you from? Where have you been? A haiku of Basho says:

*No one
walks along this path
this autumn evening.* (18)

There is a danger in thoughtlessly employing aphorisms in a spiritual context. Aphorisms and wise sayings, unless understood from a spiritually mature perspective, can easily become frozen clichés:

Even some statements which have a cracker-barrel philosopher's application can also be used to expose the deficiencies of the aphorism when pushed beyond a certain unregenerate point. Take such a beautiful and arresting saying as one which is current now in both the East and the West: 'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' When this is repeated enough, with the customary sage nod or clever wink, most people imagine that it is worn out, it becomes a truism. But when it is submitted for further examination, you may add to this something extracted from Sufi educational and psychological experience. This is to observe that, unless it is understood *how*, *when* and *where* to make that step, the assertion is devoid of the profound weight which casual and unthinking adoption so often ascribes to it. (19)

In many spiritual traditions records of interchanges between a teacher and student constitute a rich source of written instruction and inspiration that has a certain timeless quality:

"I have no peace of mind," said Hui-k'ō. "Please pacify my mind."

"Bring out your mind here before me," replied Bodhidharma, "and I will pacify it!"

"But when I seek my own mind," said Hui-k'ō, "I cannot find it."

"There!" snapped Bodhidharma, "I have pacified your mind."

At this moment Hui-k'ō had his awakening.

The greater part of Zen literature consists of these anecdotes, many of them much more puzzling than this, and their aim is always to precipitate some type of sudden realization in the questioner's mind, or to test the depth of his insight. For this reason, such anecdotes cannot be "explained" without spoiling their effect. In some respects they are like jokes which do not produce their intended effect of laughter when the "punch line" requires further explanation. One must see the point immediately, or not at all. (20)

Spiritual books may have a deeper component other than the apparent surface content, and some passages may be enciphered and have hidden meanings. "What on its outward face seems like a complete poem, myth, treatise and so on, is susceptible of another interpretation: a sort of demonstration analogous to a kaleidoscope effect."

Certain esoteric teachings, and the keys to understanding them, are sometimes embedded in materials which do not appear to be spiritual at all. For instance, in the past, the language of alchemy and the practices of magic have been employed as a disguised form of the spiritual quest. Encoded material contained in such works reveals concealed meaning when properly interpreted. The process of 'veiling' certain narrative elements with mystery or ambiguity is designed, in part, to confuse the limited, rational mind that seeks simple explanations. The

spiritual essence of some of these books may only be perceived by a person who has previously undergone certain preparation and experiences, and as a result has the necessary capacity to properly understand the inner sense of the texts.

Parables are employed in many spiritual traditions to illuminate universal truths and connect with deeper levels of human consciousness. But like all spiritual forms they can be misused and misunderstood:

Parables are extended metaphors, and we must not make the mistake of trying to interpret them past their point of usefulness. This is not to say that parables have no place on the spiritual path. On the contrary, they and metaphors can help enormously to awaken the mind to possibilities that otherwise would remain dormant and unrecognized. But parables can only awaken *possibilities*, they can only take us to the door. We must take yet another step to enter our true home. The danger with parables, as well as with metaphors, and why we must treat them with such caution, is that by awakening possibilities they open new horizons, give birth to new hope. In the radiance of this hope, in the scope of these new possibilities, we all too easily succumb to the mistaken belief that we have found true gold when all we have found are its tracings. (21)

In a certain sense, fables and myths embody "dramatized fact" and are designed to cause certain inner effects on the reader. They are used to establish a pattern or blueprint which helps the mind to operate in a 'higher' manner. "Do you imagine that fables exist only to amuse or to instruct, and are based upon fiction? The best ones are delineations of what happens in real life, in the community, and in the individual's mental processes."

Fables and stories, such as those of Aesop, Hans Christian Andersen and others, carry an inner meaning and perform the function of 'conveying water to the thirsty.' "Most fables contain at least some truth, and they often enable people to absorb ideas which the ordinary patterns of their thinking would prevent them from digesting. Fables have therefore been used to present a picture of life more in harmony with their feelings, than is possible by means of intellectual exercises."

Some books are written in the form of a series of fables designed to illustrate a point of view. They should not be taken as a literal or factual account of events as they serve to illustrate the aphorism, '*It doesn't have to be fact to be true.*'

Fables outlive fact. Legend penetrates where logic perishes. Folklore, myth and legend transcend the fluctuations of the historical process. It is as though a myth carries such a penetrating energy that it can leap the gap between cultures – a carrier-wave that unites the ceaseless and separate generations. Myth personifies abstract ideas. (22)

Poetry may contain materials related to the understanding of higher things, and can act as a bridge between the literal and metaphysical worlds. Poetry can be a unique symbolic expression of the "inexpressible mystery of existence and being." The Prophet Mohammed once said: *'In some poetry there is wisdom.'*

Poetry lends itself to a multi-layered impact on the human consciousness, bypassing the normal linear processing mode of the mind. Poems may have multiple meanings, starting with one theme and then moving to another. Or a poetic composition may make use of word-play, special meter and homophones. These linguistic devices can allow for the development of finer perceptions and harmonization with higher levels of reality:

Poetry is not only a vivid and memorable mode of expression, but for certain states of mind is more exact and penetrating than prose. For example, a poem can express with peculiar force a change of mood, a moral dilemma or a divided loyalty. It does so through its capacity to raise or lower the emotional temperature and to communicate on more than one level of meaning. The key question about something we imperfectly understand is: what is it like? The poet's answer is conveyed in simile, metaphor and allegory; employing these he can express what was obscure in terms of what is more familiar or reveal the inner mystery in what we thought was familiar. In this way we can uncover potentialities in lives deadened by habit, routine and conditioned thinking. (23)

In esoteric schools poetry may be employed as a mystical exercise, although the student must be properly prepared in order for the poetry to have a spiritual effect. "The manner in which poetry is heard, and the ability of the hearer to benefit from it, is important. The real essence of poetry cannot be appreciated by those who are not correctly prepared for its full understanding, however much an individual may believe that he is extracting the whole from hearing a poem." Spiritual teachers have stressed that poetry is not an end unto itself, but rather a bridge to a higher state of perception and being:

For Rumi, although one of the greatest poets of the East, poetry was only a secondary product. He did not regard it as any more than a reflection of the enormous inner reality which was truth, and which he calls love. The greatest love, as he says, is silent and cannot be expressed in words. Although his poetry was to affect men's minds in a way that can only be called magical, he was never carried away by it to the extent of identifying it with the far greater being of which it was a lesser expression. At the same time, he recognized it as something which could form a bridge between what he "really felt" and what he could do for others. . . . Hence, Rumi's insistence upon the subsidiary role of poetry in the perspective of the real quest. What he had to communicate was beyond poetry. To a mind conditioned to the belief that there is nothing more sublime than poetic expression, such a feeling might produce a sense of shock. It is just this application of impact which is necessary in the freeing of the mind from attachment to secondary phenomena, 'idols.' (24)

Limitations of Books and Literature

In the field of spirituality there is a sharp distinction between material written by scholars and academics and that composed by those possessing real inner knowledge. The former is written from “outside” and is *about* spirituality, while the latter represents the reality of a *living* spirituality and is designed for teaching purposes.

So-called experts sometimes totally misunderstand the meaning and purpose of spiritual writings due to their biases and ingrained assumptions. Scholars and academics tend to use and analyze this literature on a much lower level of understanding than the material warrants. This can be expressed by an analogy: “There is the husk for all to see. The kernel may be garnered by those who, first, know which is the husk, and also how to reach the kernel.” The scholarly approach treats spiritual literature on a relatively shallow level and misses the more important teaching function inherent in the writings: “Viewed from this ‘instrumental’ usage of literature, the activities of memorizing passages, selecting parts which appeal to one, comparing editions and manuscripts, seeking emotional or intellectual stimulus – all this is a different field from the inner functional one represented in this literature.”

Many translations of spiritual texts published in Western languages have significant shortcomings due to the quality of the translation and because they ignore the internal dimensions of such writings, instead providing literal renderings which lack the multi-dimensionality of the original. Zen teacher Philip Kapleau speaks to this problem: “All translation involves the constant choice of one of several alternative expressions which the translator believes may convey the meaning of the original. Whether a translator’s choices are apposite depends, in the ordinary translation, on his linguistic skill and his familiarity with the subject.”

Consider what must have happened before any ancient religious text got re-recorded. In every case, the enlightened person must have had thoughts which he must have put into words, and the words used may not have been quite adequate to convey his exact thoughts. The master’s words would have been heard by the person who recorded them, and what he recorded would surely have been according to his own understanding and interpretation. After this first handwritten record, various copies of it would have been made by several persons and the copies could have contained numerous errors. In other words, what the reader at any particular time reads and tries to assimilate could be quite different from what was really intended to be conveyed by the original master. Add to all this the unwitting or deliberate interpolations by various scholars in the course of centuries, and you will understand the problem I am trying to convey to you. I am told that the Buddha himself spoke only in the Māghadī language, whilst his teaching, as recorded, is in Pālī or in Sanskrit, which could have been done only many years later; and what we have of his teaching must have passed through numerous hands. Imagine the number of alterations and additions that must have crept into it over a long period. Is it

then any wonder that now there are differences in opinion and disputes about what the Buddha actually did say, or intended to say? (25)

The way in which people react to books and other writings is frequently coloured by their assumptions and emotional conditioning:

People read books, which affect them in various ways. They will assume that they must be able to profit by the text in exactly the way in which the author intended. This is not borne out by experience, and it is even unsound otherwise, being based upon an assumption for which there is no proof. Experiment will readily show that a book on religion, given to someone who does not know how to read it for its specific directions, will merely move the person emotionally; either because the words or phrases are such as to evoke emotion, or because of the person who gave them the book or the recommendation. These reactions are superficial, though they may appear to the unregenerate reader to be deep. (26)

Individuals often approach books in a greedy, almost compulsive manner. They lack the ability to discriminate how and what to read. When writings are not assimilated properly, they can result in a form of 'mental indigestion' which disturbs the learning process:

Literature is given to people to study for a reason. It has been chosen and given out in order to help the individual's development. But if someone is given a book to read, he will not only gallop through that one, but will search indefatigably for everything and anything connected with its themes, by the same person, or mentioned in the text. From the point of view of efficient study such a process is a grotesque of the intended effect. Without a teacher to give out suitable exercise literature, without a course of study which will lead somewhere, omnivorous reading will cause satiety – and worse. There is a saying: 'Man likes what is bad for him, and dislikes what is good for him.' This is clearly evidenced in the situation where man approaches special literature in such a wholly distressing frame of mind as to imagine that he can teach himself better than a teacher. It indicates a man who is not really a student, though he may think that he is one. A student is one who either follows a teacher, or who has the capacity to understand what he is doing. (27)

Many people study spiritual writings on a random, undifferentiated basis. They do not use the materials properly; they try to compare different writings, either support or reject what they read, seek emotional and sentimental meanings and so forth, rather than learning from them. "Although written words and spoken phrases can be the source of realization, they can be the source of bondage as well. Depending upon the way they are used, they become the finest ghee or the most vicious poison."

A common mistake of spiritual seekers is to read selectively, paying attention only to those portions which are stimulating or pleasing. One of the dangers of selective reading is taking passages and quotations out of context, without a clear picture of their true meaning:

Reading selectively and skimming over the bits that do not interest us is a wasteful procedure. Sufi writings and stories must be studied in their entirety; not only for the parts which interest the reader. People who absorb only what pleases them are generally emotionalists who can become the more easily indoctrinated, but not usually people who are in a fit state to learn beyond a certain point. (28)

Many seekers downplay the importance of written teaching materials, believing that they should be learning and experiencing "things which are not in books." Those who yearn for non-verbal learning that is not contained in books are working under an umbrella of assumptions which shield them from the real use of books. "To believe that one can get everything from books is as good – and as bad – as believing that one can get nothing from books."

Do you know how to recognize this non-verbal learning? Do you know that the "learning not in books" may be elicited by books, in their instrumental function making books necessary? Have you not thought that when your perceptions have developed, you will then have the means to understand some books, so that the prior need for them in providing frameworks for thought is recognized? Have you thought of, or heard of, or even suspected, the functional role of books and words, which lies behind their intellectual, factual or emotionally stimulative use? Nothing tells us so much about someone, in a book-oriented society, in respect to his or her potential and actual progress, as the attitude towards literature. Remember, virtually all of the great classical Sufis worked with words. Ask yourself: why was that? (29)

Although books clearly have an important place in the spiritual journey, they ultimately serve as pointers to self-realization and enlightenment. Spiritual writings can prepare the ground and explain many things, but they do not put the seeker in direct contact with living reality – truth can only be lived and experienced. Books represent only second-hand knowledge; what is essential is to come to spiritual understanding first-hand. "The sage who is the embodiment of the truth mentioned in sacred books has no use for them."

Q: Often after reading about enlightenment I seem to understand quite clearly what it is, and many times I've definitely felt the oneness of all life. But what is the difference between this kind of understanding and Zen awakening?

A: Reading about enlightenment is like reading about nutrition when you are hungry. Will that fill your belly? Obviously not. Only when you taste, chew, and swallow the food do you feel satisfied, and this is comparable to enlightenment, or awakening. But even then the food you have eaten will not nourish you until digestion and assimilation have taken place. In the same way, until you

have integrated into your daily life what you have perceived, your awakening is not working for you yet – it will not transform your life. And just as the final step in nutrition is elimination, so one must eventually rid oneself of the notion “I am enlightened.” Only then can you “walk freely between heaven and earth.” (30)

Too much reading can burden the mind with ideas and concepts. In order to awaken we must be free from “the idle speculation fostered by extensive reading and study.”

Anything that can be written in a book, anything that can be said – all this is thinking. If you are thinking, then all Zen books, all Buddhist sutras, all Bibles are demons’ words. But if you read with a mind that has cut off all thinking, then Zen books, sutras and Bibles are all the truth. So is the barking of a dog or the crowing of a rooster: all things are teaching you at every moment, and these sounds are even better teaching than Zen books. So Zen is keeping the mind which is before thinking. Science and academic studies are after thinking. We must return to before thinking. Then we will attain our true self. (31)

Ramana Maharshi counselled others to search within for the ultimate truth of their own existence and being. “Books can only tell you, ‘Realize the Self within you.’ The Self cannot be found in books. You have to find it out for yourself, in yourself.”

Q: Is it any use reading books for those who long for release?

A: All the texts say that in order to gain release one should render the mind quiescent; once this has been understood there is no need for endless reading. In order to quiet the mind one has only to inquire within oneself what one’s Self is; how could this search be done in books? One should know one’s Self with one’s own eye of wisdom. The Self is within but books are outside. It is futile to search for it in books. There will come a time when one will have to forget all that one has learned. (32)

References

- (1) Omar Ali-Shah *The Course of the Seeker* (Reno: Tractus Books, 1996), pp. 243-244.
- (2) Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), pp. 376-377.
- (3) Philip Kapleau *Zen Dawn in the West* (New York: Anchor Press, 1979), p. 27.
- (4) Adyashanti *Emptiness Dancing* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2006), p. 193.
- (5) Omar Ali-Shah *The Course of the Seeker* (Reno: Tractus Books, 1996), pp. 152-153.
- (6) Thomas Merton *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1978), p. 220.

- (7) Ramana Maharshi *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (Tiruvannamalai, India: Sri Ramana-sramam, 1984), p. 31.
- (8) Idries Shah *Reflections* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 64.
- (9) Idries Shah *Learning How to Learn* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), pp. 165-166.
- (10) Idries Shah *Learning How to Learn* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 169.
- (11) Idries Shah *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994) , pp. 224-225.
- (12) Idries Shah "First Statement" in Leonard Lewin (ed.) *The Diffusion of Sufi Ideas in the West* (Boulder: Keysign Press, 1972), p. 143.
- (13) Idries Shah *Knowing How to Know* (London: Octagon Press, 1998), pp. 84-85.
- (14) Idries Shah *Seeker After Truth* (London: Octagon Press, 1985), p. 108.
- (15) Idries Shah *Knowing How to Know* (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p. 77.
- (16) James Fadiman "The Works of Idries Shah" *CoEvolution Quarterly*, Spring 1977, p. 139.
- (17) Idries Shah *Knowing How to Know* (London: Octagon Press, 1998), p. 188.
- (18) Albert Low *To Know Yourself* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1997), p. 182.
- (19) Idries Shah *A Perfumed Scorpion* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 31.
- (20) Alan Watts *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 87.
- (21) Albert Low *The World: A Gateway* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995), p. 4.
- (22) Ernest Scott *The People of the Secret* (London: Octagon Press, 1983), p. 248.
- (23) Robert Cecil (ed.) *The King's Son* (London: Octagon Press, 1981), p. xxiv.
- (24) Idries Shah *The Sufis* (London: Octagon Press, 1984), pp. 1343-134.
- (25) Ramesh Balsekar *Pointers From Nisargadatta Maharaj* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1984), p. 36.
- (26) Idries Shah *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994) , pp. 220-221.
- (27) Faris Larby "Study and Literature" in *New Research on Current Philosophical Systems* (London: Octagon Press, 1982), pp. 18-19.
- (28) H.B.M. Dervish *Journeys with a Sufi Master* (London: Octagon Press, 1982), pp. 41-42.
- (29) Idries Shah *The Commanding Self* (London: Octagon Press, 1994) , pp. 223-224.
- (30) Philip Kapleau *Zen Dawn in the West* (New York: Anchor Press, 1979), p. 24.
- (31) Stephen Mitchell (ed.) *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha: The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), p. 12.
- (32) Ramana Maharshi *The Spiritual Teachings of Ramana Maharshi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), p. 10.