

STATES OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

*'From realms of formlessness, existence doth take form.
And fades again therein. To That we must return.'*

Rumi

The Nature of Consciousness

The observation and study of our states of consciousness throughout the rhythm of the day is central to spiritual growth and development. Consciousness is sometimes defined as “a particular kind of ‘awareness’ in human beings, independent from the mind’s activities.” Consciousness has visible and observable degrees but only a fully developed human being possesses all possible states of consciousness. Only an individual who has attained the highest state of consciousness and being is complete: others only embody a fraction of full human potentiality.

For each person there is a unique subjective quality and flavour to their ever-changing states of consciousness, yet there is a common element which reaches beyond the individual to collective humanity as a whole. One of the challenges of inner study is the ephemeral nature of consciousness itself:

If you sit quietly and try to turn your attention to your own consciousness, it is hard to pinpoint or describe. You will experience that there is awareness, but it doesn't have a color or location. At first this can feel frustrating and difficult to grasp. But the very transparent, unfixed, yet alive quality of consciousness is its nature, a bit like air around us . . . It is like empty space, but unlike space it is sentient; it knows experience. In its true state, consciousness is simply this knowing – clear, open, awake, without color or form, containing all things, yet not limited by them. This open quality of consciousness is described as unconditioned. As with the sky, all kinds of clouds and weather conditions can appear in it, but they have no effect on the sky itself. Storms may appear or disappear, but the sky remains open, limitless, unaffected by all that arises. Consciousness is unaffected by experience, just like the sky. Consciousness is also compared to a mirror. A mirror reflects all things, yet remains bright and shining, unchanged by whatever images, beautiful or terrible, may appear within it. (1)

Many traditional spiritual teachings speak of four general states of consciousness possible for human beings:

- Sleep, including both deep sleep and dreaming
- Ordinary waking consciousness, described as ‘waking sleep’ in some traditions
- Altered states of consciousness induced by drugs, hypnosis, peak experiences, and so on
- Higher states of consciousness

Some of these states of consciousness are often unrecognized as we navigate through the varied experiences of everyday life. "Most people pass through each of these four states every day of their lives, though they are aware of only some of them, or any of them only at times." In each of these levels of consciousness there is the possibility of learning and understanding, but few people can exert any degree of conscious control over these states, and as a consequence are unable to stabilize and employ particular states for the purpose of higher developmental growth.

Each state provides a certain type of knowledge which is useful for life in our world. The Sufi teacher Ibn el-Arabi of Spain expressed this teaching in a dictum to his students:

There are three forms of knowledge. The first is intellectual knowledge, which is in fact only information and the collection of facts, and the use of these to arrive at further intellectual concepts. This is intellectualism. Second comes the knowledge of states, which includes both emotional feeling and strange states of being in which man thinks that he has perceived something supreme but cannot avail himself of it. This is emotionalism. Third comes real knowledge, which is called the Knowledge of Reality. In this form, man can perceive what is right, what is true, beyond the boundaries of thought and sense. Scholastics and scientists concentrate upon the first form of knowledge. Emotionalists and experientialists use the second form. Others use the two combined, or either one alternatively. But the people who attain to truth are those who know how to connect themselves with the reality which lies beyond both these forms of knowledge. (2)

According to the Naqshbandi ('Designers') school of Sufism, there are three forms of knowledge available to human beings that correspond to different states of consciousness and perception:

The chaotic state of most people's conception of knowledge is seen in the fact that the word *knowledge* means all kinds of disparate things. There is the knowledge which comes from experience, the knowledge of a theory, knowledge of facts, and so on. One word, but several different conditions and substances being described. The Sufi needs to make a distinction which other people may not feel necessary, because he is approaching the 'fine from the coarse,' and needs (like all specialists) more precise definitions than are needed at lower levels of understanding. Approaching the question in terms familiar to ordinary people, the Sufi description is of three 'kinds of knowledge' which have to be separated, and the difference has to be felt:

- (1) The description of something – as in the words used to convey the idea of a fruit;
- (2) The feeling of something, as when one can see, feel and smell a fruit;
- (3) The perceptive connection with something, as when one takes and tastes, eats and absorbs a fruit.

These three departments of cognition are described in more technical language as:

- (1) Certain knowledge, which comes from the intellect, which tells us there is a fruit;
- (2) Eye of certainty, which is from the 'inner eye,' and operates like the senses but in relation to deeper things; the 'assessment of a fruit';
- (3) Perfect Truth, which is the experience of 'union with Truth.'

The equivalence of these three areas in familiar religious terms is:

- (1) Acceptance of divinity as a statement (= intellect);
- (2) Feeling that there is divinity (= emotion);
- (3) Perceiving divinity (= understanding or real experience). (3)

Gurdjieff spoke of four states of consciousness possible for human beings, but stressed that most people generally experience only two states – sleep and waking consciousness:

Ordinary man lives in the two lowest states of consciousness only. The two highest states of consciousness are inaccessible to him, and although he may have flashes of these states, he is unable to understand them and he judges them from the point of view of those states in which it is usual for him to be. The two usual, that is, the lowest states of consciousness are first, *sleep*, in other words a passive state in which man spends a third and very often a half of his life. And second, the state in which men spend the other part of their lives, in which they walk the streets, write books, talk on lofty subjects, take part in politics, kill one another, which they regard as active and call 'clear consciousness' or the 'waking state of consciousness.' The term 'clear consciousness' or 'waking state of consciousness' seems to have been given in jest, especially when you realize what *clear consciousness* ought in reality to be. (4)

The two higher states of consciousness only become accessible and stabilized after a long period of inner study and work. "Self-consciousness is a state in which man becomes objective towards himself, and objective consciousness is a state in which he comes into contact with the real, or objective, world from which he is now shut off by the senses, dreams and subjective states of consciousness."

In P.D. Ouspensky's formulation, the state of self-consciousness is "knowing the full truth *about ourselves*" and the state of objective consciousness is "the full truth *about everything* or "the world as it is." Gurdjieff described the two highest states of consciousness with great precision in talks with his students:

The third state of consciousness is *self-remembering* or self-consciousness or consciousness of one's being. It is usual to consider that we possess this state of consciousness or that we can have it if we want to. Science and philosophy have overlooked the fact that *we do not possess* this state of consciousness and that we cannot create it in ourselves by desire or decision alone. The fourth state of consciousness is called the *objective state of consciousness*. In this state a man can

see things *as they are*. Flashes of this state of consciousness also occur in man. In the religions of all nations there are indications of the possibility of a state of consciousness of this kind which is called 'enlightenment' and various other names but which cannot be described in words. But the only right way to objective consciousness is through the development of self-consciousness. If an ordinary man is artificially brought into a state of objective consciousness and afterwards brought back to his usual state he will remember nothing and he will think that for a time he had lost consciousness. But in the state of self-consciousness a man can have flashes of objective consciousness and remember them. The fourth state of consciousness in man means an altogether different state of being; it is the result of inner growth and long and difficult work on oneself. But the third state of consciousness constitutes the natural right of man *as he is*, and if man does not possess it, it is only because of the wrong conditions of his life. It can be said without any exaggeration that at the present time the third state of consciousness occurs in man only in the form of very rare flashes and that it can be made more or less permanent in him by means of special training. (5)

According to the teachings of Advaita Vedanta, the way in which we perceive the world depends on our state of consciousness. For instance, in the normal waking state we perceive discrete objects with names and forms, in the dream state subjective images, in deep dreamless sleep there are no perceptions and in the transcendental state one is in harmony with everything, and there is nothing apart from the Self.

In a sense the dreaming and waking states are similar: "When you are dreaming the story is real for you. Only later do you call it a dream. What makes you so certain you are not dreaming now?"

Essentially, there is no great difference between the waking state and the dreaming state. In the dreaming state you bite an apple and taste the sweetness the same as in the waking state. It is only when you are in the waking state that you say the dream was a mental production. But as long as the dreamer belongs to the dream, the so-called waking state is also a dreaming state. (6)

The highest state of consciousness is timeless presence or pure awareness, the background behind and between perceptions, thoughts and feelings. This background of consciousness is unaffected by the appearances of the states of deep sleep, dreaming and waking consciousness. The Indian sage Ramana Maharshi clearly articulated this idea: "The sleep, dream and waking states are mere phenomena appearing on the Self which is itself stationary and also a state of simple awareness . . . The Self is the basis of all the experiences. It remains as the witness and the support of all of them."

The Self underlies all other states and is timeless and unchanging, eternal and ever-present. Ramana Maharshi provided a useful analogy: "The cotton made into various clothes, we call by

various names. The gold made into various ornaments, we call by various names. But all the clothes are cotton and all the ornaments gold. The one is real; the many are mere names and forms." In the same sense, the various states of deep sleep, dreaming and waking consciousness appear on the background of timeless presence and being and have no enduring, independent nature of their own:

There is only one state, that of consciousness or awareness of existence. The three states of waking, dream and sleep cannot be real. They simply come and go. The Real will always exist. The 'I' or existence that alone persists in all the three states is real. The other three are not real and so it is not possible to say they have such and such a degree of reality. We may roughly put it like this. Existence or consciousness is the only reality. Consciousness plus waking we call waking. Consciousness plus sleep, we call sleep. Consciousness plus dream, we call dream. Consciousness is the screen on which all the pictures come and go. The screen is real, the pictures are mere shadows on it. Because by long habit we have been regarding these three states as real, we call the state of mere awareness or consciousness as the fourth. There is however no fourth state, but only one state. (7)

The true nature of Reality is discovered when the illusory nature of time-bound states of consciousness is truly perceived and understood. "All the aspects of multiplicity are superimpositions over-laying the Ultimate Reality and by which it is veiled. The vanishing of this superimposition reveals the truth which is then unmasked as is a shadow which one took to be a thief."

In deep sleep there is not a knower. It is a state without a knower. In this way it is nearer to our real nature, the non-state, than the waking state and dreaming state, which suppose a knower. All three states are superimposed on reality, on consciousness. Before you go to sleep in the evening, give up all your qualifications, let dissolve all that is psychological, all residues of thought, ideas, problems, tensions and so on, so that there remains only one quality, the being without any quality. In other words, come to know what is impermanent in you, and what is permanent shines. The letting go of all that is impermanent, all that you are not, is the same giving up as in the moment when you pass away. When you die, you must, in any case, give up all your qualifications. And when you die you must give them up knowingly. Why wait till then? Why not die every evening so that you see that there is no death. When you have completely died in the evening, you will find yourself already present in the morning *before* the body wakes up. Before the body wakes up, you are. You are presence. The waking up of the body and the waking up of the world, the creation of the world, takes place in you, in your presence. This is a very important moment. For then you will be convinced that the background of consciousness is never affected by the appearing of the three states. (8)

Ordinary Waking Consciousness

Our normal waking consciousness is characterized by subjectivity, conditioned patterns of behaviour and lack of a stable, free attention. In many ways it is indistinguishable from the state of sleep:

A man wakes up. At first glance this is quite a different state of consciousness. He can move, he can talk with other people, he can make calculations ahead, he can see danger and avoid it, and so on. It stands to reason that he is in a better position than when he was asleep. But if we go a little more deeply into things, if we take a look into his inner world, into his thoughts, into the causes of his actions, we shall see that he is in almost the same state as when he is asleep. And it is even worse, because in sleep he is passive, that is, he cannot do anything. In the waking state, however, he can do something all the time and the results of all his actions will be reflected upon him or upon those around him. *And yet he does not remember himself.* He is a machine, everything with him *happens*. He cannot stop the flow of his thoughts, he cannot control his imagination, his emotions, his attention. He lives in a subjective world of 'I love,' 'I do not love,' 'I like,' 'I do not like,' 'I want,' 'I do not want.' He does not see the real world. The real world is hidden from him by the wall of imagination. *He lives in sleep.* He is asleep. What is called 'clear consciousness' is sleep and a far more dangerous sleep than sleep at night in bed. (9)

In *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, P.D. Ouspensky described a simple experiment to study the quality of our consciousness: "Take a watch and look at the second hand -- simply follow the movements of the second hand and be aware of yourself, your name, your existence, and the place where you are." The limit of our ability to perform this task, even with great effort and persistence, is typically two minutes or less:

The most important deduction that one can make after making this experiment in the right way is *that man is not conscious of himself*. The illusion of his being conscious of himself is created by memory and thought processes. For instance, a man goes to the theater. If he is accustomed to it, he is not especially conscious of being there, although he can see things and observe them, enjoy the performance or dislike it, remember it, remember people he met, and so on. When he comes home he remembers that he was in the theater, and certainly he thinks that he was conscious while he was there. So he has no doubts about his consciousness and he does not realize that his consciousness can be completely absent while he can still act reasonably, think, observe. (10)

Consciousness contains levels beneath ordinary awareness. The 'subconscious' or 'unconscious' state is prone to external influences which can create tension and confusion. A person

can absorb these influences without being conscious of the fact that they are being recorded at a level normally hidden from everyday waking consciousness:

The unconscious or subconscious mind can influence a person's behaviour and thought pattern to a very deep degree, and actually become their reaction. As a result of this conditioning, their reaction is something they come to accept as normal or an integral part of their personality, and they often allow this conditioning to come to the surface and influence their thoughts and actions in a form of instinctive reaction without any conscious thought at all. It is also because their conditioning has sometimes not left them with any choice in how to react to a certain situation – they have a set reaction based on conditioning, and, to a certain degree, based on their personality – they have a certain set of cards, if you like, which in a given circumstance, they play automatically. (11)

In Buddhist teachings desire, aversion and delusion are seen as the mainsprings of human bondage, preventing pristine consciousness from realizing its inherent higher possibilities of conscious manifestation in the world:

The realm of desire is the normal state of mind in which we live. We have senses and consciousness, and we relate ourselves to the external world under the influence of conditioning created by our senses and consciousness. When we see something, we are conditioned by what we see. Our hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and consciousness are the same. We are very easily conditioned by thinking and so create all kinds of problems and frustrations. (12)

Our ordinary state of consciousness is not grounded in the reality of the present moment but rather is drawn to memories and thoughts of the past and expectations of the future:

If we open our eyes and see clearly, it becomes obvious that there is no other time than this instant, and that the past and the future are abstractions without any concrete reality. Until this has become clear, it seems that our life is all past and future, and that the present is nothing more than the infinitesimal hairline which divides them. From this comes the sensation of "having no time," of a world which hurries by so rapidly that it is gone before we can enjoy it. But through "awakening to the instant" one sees that this is the reverse of the truth: it is rather the past and future which are the fleeting illusions, and the present which is eternally real. We discover that the linear succession of time is a convention of our single-track verbal thinking, of a consciousness which interprets the world by grasping little pieces of it, calling them things and events. But every such grasp of the mind excludes the rest of the world, so that this type of consciousness can get an approximate vision of the whole only through a series of grasps, one after another. (13)

A common human misconception is the failure to distinguish the difference between 'knowledge' and 'understanding,' a relationship which is mediated by the level of a person's 'being.'

People believe that greater understanding depends on greater knowledge rather than growth of being and spiritual insight and maturity: "The thinking apparatus may *know* something. But understanding appears only when a person *feels* and *senses* what is connected with it . . . to know and *to know how to do* are two different things, and *knowing how to do* is not created by knowledge alone."

Knowledge by itself does not give understanding. Nor is understanding increased by an increase of knowledge alone. Understanding depends on the relation of knowledge to being. Understanding is the resultant of knowledge and being. And knowledge and being must not diverge too far, otherwise understanding will prove to be far removed from either. At the same time the relation of knowledge to being does not change with a mere growth of knowledge. It changes only when being grows simultaneously with knowledge. In other words, understanding grows only with the growth of being. (14)

The Sufis identify three levels or gradations of understanding, reflecting the state of consciousness of the learner:

- Common, general, informational – the world of everyday consensual experience
- Conceptual and intellectual knowledge – the provenance of specialists and scientists
- Higher knowledge based on personal experience and insight – the reality beyond sensate experience: "the retrieval of Truth and awareness of fact."

These three degrees of knowledge were described by the classical Sufi teacher al-Ghazali in these terms:

Everyone is in reality in one of three categories in respect to knowledge. First, he shares in the general stock of knowledge and what is called knowledge by the community in which he lives: the larger, social world of his family, tribe, nation, civilization. Second, he may enter the ranks of those who understand more, who specialize. Third, he can enter the circle of those who have a realization of understanding through direct experience. These three levels are found, for instance, in the general *idea* of (say) being a blacksmith; then of learning how to become a blacksmith, and finally the experience of actually being a blacksmith. (15)

Many esoteric traditions teach that human beings must 'awaken' from their current state of 'waking sleep' in order to develop higher levels of perception and being:

All the absurdities and all the contradictions of people, and of human life in general, become explained when we realize that people *live in sleep*, do everything in sleep, and do not know that they *are asleep*. It is useful to remember that this is the inner meaning of many ancient doctrines. The best known to us is Christianity, or the Gospel Teaching, in which the idea that men live in sleep and must first of all awake is the basis of all the explanations of human life, although it is very rarely

understood as it should be understood, in this case literally. But the question is: *how* can a man awake? The Gospel teaching demands awakening, but does not say how to awaken. But the psychological study of consciousness shows that only when a man realizes that he is asleep, is it possible to say that he is on the way to awakening. He can never awaken without first realizing his sleep. (16)

Intuition and Holistic Perception

Neuro-physiological research suggests that there are two complementary modalities of human brain functioning: the linear, logical mode and the intuitive, holistic mode. Each hemisphere of the brain processes information in a distinct, specialized way. Generally, the left hemisphere functions in a linear, sequential, analytic mode, specializing in logic, language and mathematics. The right hemisphere, in contrast, is more symbolic, spatial and attuned to pattern-recognition:

It has been shown that the two cerebral hemispheres of the cortex are specialized for different modes of information-processing. The left hemisphere operates primarily in a verbal-intellectual and sequential mode, the right hemisphere primarily in a spatial and simultaneous mode. The right hemisphere mode is often devalued by the dominant, verbal intellect. This second mode often appears inelegant, lacking the formal reasoning, linearity and polish of the intellect. It is more involved in space than in time, more involved in intuition than in logic and language. It is a mode often forgotten and ignored, especially within the scientific community, but one which may prove important for science and even for our own survival. Since it is nonlinear, this second mode is not involved in the "ordinary" realm of cause and effect which underlies so much of our personal and intellectual life. It is present-centered, a mode in which all occurrences are said to exist as a "patterned whole." (17)

According to the Sufis there may be a third mode of perception connected with the interplay of the left- and right-brain functions. Certain Sufi procedures and activities are designed to induce the brain to balance itself between linear and holistic expressions, between the more or less specific and the relatively abstract:

It is certainly true that Sufi experiences appear to make things which are perceived as ideas come into the field of action, and actions to prompt ideas. This may also be one source of Sufis doing things which have a physical shape but no verbal explanation, though they originate with an 'inspiration' and not in the form of words. It could even be maintained that Sufi education aims at getting both sides of the brain to work, and helping them to operate at times in concert, and not alternatively. (18)

Traditionally, Sufis have specialized in alternating techniques to operate as a bridge between the two brain hemispheres. “The mystic sees both the right-brained dreamer/romantic and the left-brained scientist/ literalist as part of the same kind of person.” The usage of unfamiliar or even confusing stories and statements is one method of switching the activity of the brain from the logical and sequential to the holistic and simultaneous mode. In certain books, such as *The Sufis* by Idries Shah, a ‘scatter’ technique is used to create a non-linear impression, partly by “giving glimpses and deliberately refusing to follow through with too great systematization.”

Sufi material may help the two hemispheres of the brain to act alternately or complement each other. Sufi teachers may deliberately transpose the figurative to the literal, or the linear for the holistic, in situations involving physical encounters and verbal exchanges:

We can take cryptic utterances, formerly admired for their mysterious quality, and see that they might well indicate an awareness of two different modes of operation in respect to the same material: Abu Sina, the great philosopher, met the Sufi Abu Said. When they were asked to comment on the meeting, the philosopher said of the Sufi: “What I know, he sees.” The Sufi said of the philosopher, “What I see, he knows.” Here, surely, we have the two forms of awareness: the sequential knows in one way, the holistic in another -- the way called here ‘seeing.’ Sufi materials, when employed by Sufis, bridges the gap, between the inexpressible, holistic experience and the workings of the hard-and-fast, obvious linear mode . . . This enables people to ‘return to the world,’ to relate the holistic experience to their human life and their being. (19)

Intuition is associated with the right brain hemisphere and is sometimes defined as “direct vision, an immediate grasping of a situation or circumstance.” Intuition involves a holistic perception of the whole. In contemporary Western culture intuition is often devalued or confused with “irrational” or “sloppy” thinking.

It is time to give the simultaneous aspect of our consciousness its due place in our understanding of the mind, in our education, and in human affairs. Intuition is not an obscure, mysterious function possessed by only a very few highly creative and unusual artists and scientists who produce interesting theories. Intuition is a faculty considered largely negative – creativity is romanticized, made external, considered unavailable to most ordinary people. The faculty of intuition is, rather, latent in all of us, a primary aspect of our cognitive abilities which we have allowed to degenerate. (20)

Many spiritual teachings propose that real knowledge is the product of intuition. Insights, often extrapolated from a single simple experience, are often associated with the development of an infallible intuitive understanding of life:

According to esoteric tradition, the “organ of perception,” which can be tutored in the same fashion as is language, is what we term intuition. Although the phrase is

often maligned, conventionally used to indicate random guesswork or a mysterious combination of elements, it should be properly understood as *knowledge without recourse to inference*. The diverse and seemingly unconnected practices of religious and esoteric traditions center around the cultivation of what we might call nonlinear immediate understanding, in complement to the inferential, ordered sequence of “rational” thought. The metaphor of sight is often employed; it is like explaining to a blind man what color is like. If a man has cataracts, for instance, and thus an unrealized potential for sight, we should take him to an eye surgeon who can aid in the removal of his occlusions, rather than engage in innumerable discussions of what he is missing. (21)

There is a close relationship between intuition and what is sometimes called instinct or common sense. “Intuition is simply an instinct which is capable of being developed on levels which are not touched by the conventionally accepted five senses.”

Instinct, common sense or horse sense is a thing which unfortunately has become vastly underrated, because it’s dismissed as unimportant. Common sense is a basic human reaction to situations, a form of analysis which is a ‘gut reaction.’ Most things which communicate to a person’s common sense are not capable of being measured, labeled or weighed in social, political or any other terms. They cannot be put in a category . . . Instinct is the deep consciousness communicating on a very human and basic level. It is very often something nudging you in an unsophisticated way, and calling your attention to something which is hostile or alien because you have already measured it from other points of view. (22)

Intuition is outside the normal linear process of thought and rationality. It is a direct and immediate perception of the whole. “It is like a painter who, in a certain moment, sees the whole picture on the canvas. This doesn’t mean he sees all the details, but at least the main elements, the proportions. Afterwards he realizes the painting in space-time.”

It is of utmost importance not to analyze intuition. Don’t fit it or put it in a frame. Don’t put any contours around it. Leave it completely open because it is alive. Of course, the realization of an intuition occurs in space-time, and requires you to use both your practical brain and body. But the support of all your action, of all your thought, of all the necessary documentation, is this intuition lying behind the appearance. At the beginning intuition may pertain to your behaviour and your activities. But a moment comes when you have an intuition of your whole life, when your whole life, past, present and future, surfaces. Like the artist you don’t see the details, but you feel the dynamic tension. This tension is not a reaction but something tangible you feel in the same way you feel the proportions of this room. (23)

For a human being to attain fulfilment and completion, the intelligence of intuition must be developed and brought into action to complement the linear, rational mind. “What is the absurdity to the intellectual becomes its strength to the intuitively perceptive.”

Progress along the way also opens the mind to new perceptions. Intuition becomes developed at its deepest levels, and one begins to sense new dimensions of reality. These new dimensions are sometimes described as existing in “another world,” a “higher realm,” or a “different reality.” A Sufi teaching story called “The Unknown Ceiling” provides an analogy:

Suppose we have a house with walls, ceilings, floors, and we are inside that house. Let us say that through long-established custom, people can touch and deal with only the floors and walls. If someone were to walk in and say: “Look at the ceiling,” the people would be incapable of doing so – rather like a child which cannot see something, certainly cannot observe it, unless it has been demonstrated to it. Suppose, further, that the custom of generations was to hang things on walls and not to have anything on the ceilings. Objects on the ceilings might then be “invisible” to the people at large. (24)

At its deepest level, intuition is a global vision that emanates from the ground of being, from the perennial source of all that is:

Real intelligence or insight issues from the Self. In other words, action springs directly out of silence without the intervention of mind or ego, thought or memory. Intelligence belongs to the totality, to silent awareness. It comes from taking note in a non-judgemental way of the various circumstances of your life. Taking note brings you to a stop, and in this stopping there is no longer any reference to your surroundings. You are completely still, so all out-going energy returns to its origin and silent awareness knows itself by itself. Knowing oneself by oneself is intuition. (25)

Altered States of Consciousness

There is an extensive range and variety of altered states of consciousness which are accessible to human beings, including reveries, trance states, special psychic states, rapture and drug-induced experiences. These states are difficult to describe to others and may not be apparent to outside observers. “The reality of these experiences is very difficult to grasp for the outsider, because he is accustomed to thinking in terms that are different from this state . . . At best the outsider can only relate the experience which is reported to him in terms of his own experience – sensual, orgiastic or emotional.”

Traditional spiritual teachings caution that altered states of consciousness are not always indicative of spiritual attainment and knowledge. There are said to be three basic ‘states’: counterfeit or imagined, genuine and irrelevant. “The height of folly is to assume that the presence or absence of a ‘state’ is in itself indicative of something good or bad.”

A Stage is not a *State*. 'States' are episodes of altered consciousness which come upon the individual, without his being able to control them. The 'State' is also known as a 'gift.' The main objective of Sufis experiencing these flashes is to get beyond them. The eminent teacher Junaid of Baghdad emphasises that "States are like flashes of lightning: their permanence is merely a suggestion of the lower self." This means that their filtering through the unaltered ego causes delusions. If they can be felt, and are valued instead of conducting to the stage of perceptual breakthrough, the student is in a rut. Similarly, the 'States' indicate a contaminant in the person, who should instead (and eventually will, it is hoped) experience knowledge instead of intoxication or dazzle. (26)

The use of chemical substances to change human physiological functioning and consciousness has a long historical record. In many cases these drugs cause "false phenomena" which are shadows of authentic spiritual experiences. But in certain contexts they may be employed by schools of higher human development to induce certain enhanced states of consciousness in spiritual aspirants. Gurdjieff discussed this in talks with his students:

There are schools which make use of narcotics in the right way. People in these schools take them for self-study; in order to take a look ahead, to know their possibilities better, to see beforehand, 'in advance,' what can be attained later on as a result of prolonged work. When a man sees this and is convinced that what he has learned theoretically really exists, he then works consciously, he knows where he is going. Sometimes this is the easiest way of being convinced of the real existence of those possibilities which man often suspects in himself. There is a special chemistry relating to this. There are particular substances for each function. Each function can either be strengthened or weakened, awakened or put to sleep. But to do this a great knowledge of the human machine and of this special chemistry is necessary. In all those schools which make use of this method, experiments are carried out only when they are really necessary and only under the direction of experienced and competent men who can foresee all the results and adopt measures against possible undesirable consequences. (27)

Auto-hypnotic states may be produced by focused concentration or by repetition, but these induced states have a number of possible undesirable side effects. One of these is when the mind goes completely blank and there is no awareness of physical reality. Authentic spiritual teachings stress that random experimentation to induce altered states of consciousness rarely leads to permanent or useful results: "Many have tried, by drugs and exercises, to alter their perceptions. Few have succeeded, because they do not understand the nature of the systematic 'warp' which disables them. In consequence they alter perceptions inefficiently, incorrectly and uselessly."

If altered states of consciousness appear randomly or repetitiously they are next to useless in terms of real spiritual development. For instance, if higher states of consciousness are engendered in individuals before they are in a condition to preserve that state, they will lose its

advantage: “There is a price on this knowledge. It is to be given to those who can keep it and not lose it.” For this reason traditional spiritual teachings carefully prepare students to activate special states of awareness by first refining and purifying their normal states of consciousness:

The full dynamic of the Organ of Evolution becomes operative only when something akin to detachment has been attained. This happens only when certain educational preparations have been made. Before the stage of conscious development, various indisputable experiences mark certain stages of advance. These give the individual both proof of his progress and strength to continue to the next stage. Unless he receives these illuminations in correct succession, he will stay at a stage of partial awareness or occasional concentrative power. One of the least desirable results of such out-of-sequence development is when the candidate is not weaned from dependence upon his instructor. When what we have called the Organ of Evolution is developed and working, the functions of instinct, emotion and intellect are transmuted and work in a new key. A fresh and ever-widening series of experiences is open to the aspirant. Infinite possibilities and intricate mechanisms are now seen in things which formerly seemed inert or of limited use. (28)

In both Hinduism and Buddhism, *Samadhi* denotes a state of consciousness in which the mind is absorbed in perfect concentration on an object of meditation. “In *Samadhi* the yogi always experiences an intensely blissful sensation, which is both physical and psychic. The intensity and profundity of this blissfulness is far greater than any bliss which the average human being has ever experienced.” However, it is generally acknowledged that *Samadhi* is merely a higher state of mental concentration, and should not be confused with spiritual realization:

Q: What is the difference between the state of Samadhi and realization?

A: Roughly speaking the difference might be expressed as follows. There is a state of consciousness of the Self which can be reached by a technique of relaxation of the mind. In such a case, the state of consciousness of the Self is what is usually called ecstasy or Samadhi. The drawback of such a state is that it may be both acquired and lost. As soon as the conditioning, which in the first place caused the mind to relax ceases, one merges from ecstasy and returns to the state of things which preceded it . . . Now every technique produces a conditioning; and no technique can produce a permanent conditioning because an absolute state of being cannot be a product. The Samadhi therefore had to come to an end and the yogi return to his former condition. But that state of consciousness of the Self which is realization is something different. This state is not really a state, it is a return to the natural original order (*Sahaja*). This return is not reached by any conditioning. It comes about with the discrimination between the real and the unreal, with the elimination of the unreal . . . Meister Eckhart uses an image to describe such a state. He says it is like “the hinge which is motionless whilst the door turns.” (29)

Most spiritual traditions stress that ecstasy and states of 'inebriation' are only foretastes of full enlightenment and realization: "You can lose yourself temporarily in ecstatic states but when your real nature is not a state, why look for states?"

You want something like a round-the-clock ecstasy. But ecstasies come and go, necessarily, for the human brain cannot stand the tension for a long time. A prolonged ecstasy will burn out your brain, unless it is extremely pure and subtle. In nature nothing is at stand-still, everything pulsates, appears and disappears. Heart, breath, digestion, sleep and waking, birth and death – everything comes and goes in waves. Rhythm, periodicity, harmonious alternation of extremes is the rule. No use rebelling against the very pattern of life. If you seek the immutable, go beyond experience. (30)

In the teachings of Zen Buddhism it is stressed that the attainment of altered states of consciousness is not the primary goal: "On the contrary, the aim of Zen Buddhism is to become immune from being conditioned into altered states." And the classical Sufi teacher Al-Ghazali realized that states of spiritual absorption were only preliminary steps to inner perception and enlightenment: "Instead of being bemused by his ecstatic experiences, considering them the be-all and end-all of the mystical quest, Ghazali realized that the so-called absorption in God, considered to be the *goal* of the Sufis, is in fact only the beginning."

Q: What is the difference between a mystic in the usual sense of the word and a realized man?

A: A mystic in the usual sense of the word is a man who seeks experiences and whose ideal is to reach a state of ecstasy. The search for ecstasy, for the experience of ecstasy, has nothing to do with realization. Ecstasy is a state – one can enter it and emerge from it – without having known any real transmutation. The realized man, on the other hand, has regained the consciousness of his true nature, and is thereby reinstated in his primeval and eternal being. The mystic, once he has emerged from his ecstasy, returns to his human nature, practically unchanged. He is in much the same situation as before and face to face with all the difficulties of life. Whereas for the realized man, the world has lost its objective and distinctive (and consequently problematic) character, and then appears to him as shining forth from the Self. (31)

Mystical Experience and Illumination

The state of mystical illumination or 'gnosis' is considered the final stage of the spiritual journey. It is sometimes referred to as 'Alpha and Omega,' a primal state of unification and completion linking the beginning and the end of spiritual development, thus completing the 'mystic circle.' In one sense it is the perception of unity in diversity.

In more religious terms, 'gnosis' is described as guidance through "the perception of the workings of divine activity," which transcends the phenomenal world of space and time. When the divine attributes are realized in the purified heart and mind of the seeker, one becomes a 'mirror of the universe' or an 'image of God.'

According to the Sufis, "mystic knowledge is based on revelation or apocalyptic vision and depends on the influence of the divine upon the human, which brings about its realization. The resulting influence is called *grace*. This flows down from God each moment, calling upon the soul and attracting it to Himself." And in the words of Jesus: "Whoever has knowledge and who works and teaches, shall be mighty in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Mystical consciousness reveals an underlying unity which includes possibilities of further dimensions of understanding and conscious action. The mystical understanding of the continuum of life and death is encapsulated by the phrase 'Die before you die,' pointing to the possibility of experiencing, before the end of human life on earth, the perennial existence which follows physical death. "It is the existence in which the human phase of being is only a part and which can be seen as an interruption or stage, as sleep may be viewed as an interruption of wakefulness."

In the state of mystical perception it is possible to 'remove the veil' and dissolve the barrier "between *now* and *then*, between life and death, between humanity and the beyond." In this merging with objective Reality or Truth there is no longer a distinction between the one and the many, or between past, present and future:

By concentration, contemplation, meditation and so on, in planned and guided steps, the Sufi enters into that comprehensive Reality. The consequence of this is that he can enter the "future," because the future is in fact there all the time. He can even adjust happenings, because they are all part of a whole with which he is concerned, not parts, which could only be affected locally. Sufis heal through "becoming" the disease and moving it away; they see the future by entering it; they cause baffling effects by operating with those fields of reality which are normally screened off by mental assumptions and sense-based approaches. (32)

In traditional Advaita Vedanta teachings advanced states of absorption (*Samadhi*) are divided into three successively finer levels or degrees:

Sivikalpa Samadhi: In this state Self-awareness is maintained by constant effort. The continuity of the *Samadhi* is wholly dependent on the effort put in to maintain it. When Self-attention wavers, Self-awareness is obscured.

Kevala Nirvikalpa Samadhi: This is the stage below Self-realization. In this state there is a temporary but effortless Self-awareness, but the ego has not been finally eliminated. It is characterized by an absence of body-consciousness. Although one has a temporary awareness of the Self in this state, one is not able to

perceive sensory information or function in the world. When body-consciousness returns, the ego reappears.

Sahaja Nirvikalpa Samadhi: This is the state of the *jnani* who has finally and irrevocably eliminated his ego. *Sahaja* means 'natural' and *Nirvikalpa* means 'no differences.' A *jnani* in this state is able to function naturally in the world, just as an ordinary person does. Knowing that he is the Self, the *Sahaja jnani* sees no differences between himself and others and no difference between himself and the world. For such a person, everything is a manifestation of the indivisible Self. (33)

Ramana Maharshi poetically described the distinction between the two highest states of *Samadhi* in the following terms: "In *Kevala Nirvikalpa Samadhi* the mind is alive, sunk in Light, like a bucket tied to a rope and left lying in the water in a well, to be drawn out by the other end of the rope; while in *Sahaja Nirvikalpa Samadhi* the mind is dead, resolved into the Self, like a river discharged into the ocean and its identity lost since a river cannot be redirected from the ocean."

The states of *Samadhi* follow a progression from bliss to emptiness to unity and final Realization. Ramana Maharshi: "Realization is not the acquisition of anything new nor is it a new faculty. It is only a removal of all camouflage." But many spiritual aspirants become frozen and fixed at the earlier stages of *Samadhi* and cannot progress further:

The meeting with emptiness is something absolutely new; and it may easily be mistaken for realization. Then there occurs a tendency to settle in this emptiness which one has learnt to produce. It is comforting to pacify the ego and to taste this emptiness. But one should not mistake the taste of a silent mind with the experience of which I am speaking. This state is still an object, it has to be abandoned, the last step has to be taken . . . *Samadhi* experienced as joy is in fact a state into which one enters and from which one emerges. Sooner or later its insufficiency is felt. (34)

In the highest state of silence and unity, free from the accumulation of the past and expectation of the future, the mind undergoes a radical transformation: "It is no longer a restless, self-centered instrument rationalizing and justifying mechanical behaviour. Transmutation touches every corner of your being, all its obscure urges, and a new human being is born."

Q: To actualize our potential it seems there's something to learn or understand.

A: We must distinguish between learning, accumulation of knowledge, and understanding or knowing, the immediate insight into our real nature. Appropriation of facts is necessary when studying a trade, an instrument, a language, and so on. But we cannot acquire what we fundamentally are. We can only recognize it. Recognition is an instantaneous happening.

Q: How can I come to this recognition?

A: In daily life there are glimpses of your primal knowing state. There are brief moments when you are in quietness without the dynamism of becoming. Generally you overlook these moments because you tend to know yourself only in relation to situations, events and objects. When you acknowledge these moments of stillness, you become aware of a new dimension in your living, a dimension not related to any event or thought. Once you are open to this dimension it appears more often than you had ever noticed before. (35)

The highest state of consciousness is an experience of silence and stillness, of pure existence, a full and complete awareness of one's true being. In Advaita Vedanta this primal, pure, natural state is termed *sahaja Samadhi*: "Those who are in the *sahaja* state are like a light in a windless place, or the ocean without waves – there is no movement." Ramana Maharshi described *sahaja Samadhi* in these terms:

Here you have steadiness and you remain calm and composed even while you are active. You realize that you are moved by the deeper real Self within. You have no worries, no anxieties, no cares, for you come to realize that there is nothing belonging to you. You know that everything is done by something with which you are in conscious union . . . In this natural state the mind is free from doubts. It has no need to swing between alternatives of possibilities and probabilities. It sees no differences of any kind. It is sure of the truth because it feels the presence of the real. Even when it is active, it knows it is active in the reality, the Self, the supreme being. (36)

Pure awareness is the essence of reality and is beyond the various states of consciousness which alternate and change in most human beings. Pure awareness is the sense of being alive, of being present, of existing in the here and now moment. "The essence of mind is only *awareness* or pure consciousness. The cosmic mind, not being limited by the ego, has nothing separate from itself and is therefore *only aware*. This is what the Bible means by 'I am that I AM'."

Watch yourself closely and you will see that whatever may be the content of consciousness, the witnessing of it does not depend on the content. Awareness is itself and does not change with the event. The event may be pleasant or unpleasant, minor or important; awareness is the same. Take note of the peculiar nature of pure awareness, its natural self-identity, without the least trace of self-consciousness, and go to the root of it and you will soon realize that awareness is your true nature and nothing you may be aware of, you can call your own. (37)

The sense of pure being and existence, of 'I Am,' is a manifestation of the universal life force and is not individualistic or limited to any one particular life form. In pure awareness there is the primal experience of just *being*, free from the subject-object duality of ordinary life:

True awareness is a state of pure witnessing, without the least attempt to do anything about the event witnessed. Your thoughts and feelings, words and

actions, may also be a part of the event; you watch all unconcerned in the full light of clarity and understanding. You understand precisely what is going on, because it does not affect you. Once you are in it, you will find that you love what you see, whatever may be its nature. This choiceless love is the touchstone of awareness. If it is not there, you are merely interested – for some personal reasons. (38)

Pure awareness has been compared to a sheet of white paper. The words written on the paper are analogous to the world of phenomenal existence, the world of appearances. Yet the white sheet exists prior to and beyond the writing. The Self is the background and support of all that is and is sometimes compared to a light that illuminates phenomenal objects, yet exists independent of these objects:

The Self is the one reality that always exists and it is by its light that all other things are seen. We forget it and concentrate on the appearances. The light in the hall burns, both when persons are present there and when they are absent, both when persons are enacting something as in a theatre and when nothing is being enacted. It is the light which enables us to see the hall, the persons and the acting. We are so engrossed with the objects or appearances revealed by the light that we pay no attention to the light. In the waking state and dream state, in which things appear, and in the sleep state, in which we see nothing, there is always the light of consciousness or Self, like the hall-lamp always burning. The thing to do is to concentrate on the Seer and not on the seen, not on the objects, but on the Light which reveals them. (39)

Zen Buddhism also teaches that what is truly essential in our life is simply the fact that we exist. The natural state of our mind is open attention and receptivity: “Be like wild animals who are perfectly alert without any reference to self-image, past or future. The natural body and mind is as awake as a panther.”

In the state of pure awareness there is a oneness with reality. Realization of our real nature and being brings a universal, non-personal perspective to life in which one recognizes the preciousness of all that exists:

Become aware of yourself in everyday life. Get acquainted with seeing and living without qualifying, without putting labels on the seen. Once the reflex to interfere in the observed drops away and perception is no longer directed or confined, it becomes alive, borderless, multi-dimensional. In this openness there is no personal identity, no image of somebody, only total freedom. It can never be sought or achieved, for it is your very nature, to which all perception points. (40)

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