

CONDITIONING AND HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

'To a sick person, sweet water tastes bitter in the mouth.'

Al-Ghazali

The Nature of Conditioning and Indoctrination

Human beings are conditioned by a constellation of experiences. In some cases the conditioning is by deliberate indoctrination while in other instances the conditioning factor is imperceptible and unrecognized. "Individuals and groups of people are played upon, diverted and pulled along channels chosen by others, sometimes acceptably, sometimes otherwise."

Conditioned patterns of memory, thought, emotion and behaviour are deeply ingrained in the human psyche and exert a powerful, albeit unconscious, influence on individual and collective human affairs. "In order to fully experience anything the mind must be empty, free from memory, emotionality, gain and expectation. What we call experience is generally the repetition of sensation or the projection of memory."

One of the basic drawbacks of conditioned behaviour is that individuals and groups become entrained to certain limited responses, robbing them of the possibility of flexibility, adaptability and new learning. Conditioning produces a whole series of blocks and impediments which lead to a sort of mental prison (closed minds) incompatible with higher development. Experiences which we have undergone in the past can condition our reactions and responses to the events of the present moment:

Q: How can I free my mind from conditioning?

A: Mind is function, energy in movement. It is a storehouse on different levels of consciousness of individual and collective past experiences. Without memory there is no mind, for thoughts are sounds, words and symbols appearing in our memory. Memory is itself conditioned, being based on the pleasure-pain structure; all pleasure is stored and whatever is painful is relegated to the unconscious layers. The basic function of the human organism is survival. Biological survival is a natural instinct, but psychological survival is the source of conflict since it is simply survival of the psyche with its center the "me." What we generally call learning is appropriation and conditioned by psychological survival. The conditioned mind cannot be changed by its own effort or system. (1)

Many common human emotions and reactions are based on conditioned thinking patterns which often have their roots in early childhood experiences. These memory-traces continue to exert a powerful influence throughout our lives. "One can observe older children scolding younger children in exactly the same fashion that they have been scolded."

The emotional component of ego differs from person to person. In some egos, it is greater than in others. Thoughts that trigger emotional responses in the body may sometimes come so fast that before the mind has had time to voice them, the body has already responded with an emotion, and the emotion has turned into a reaction. Those thoughts exist at a preverbal stage and could be called unspoken, unconscious assumptions. They have their origin in a person's past conditioning, usually from early childhood . . . Unconscious assumptions create emotions in the body which in turn generate mind activity and/or instant reactions. In this way, they create your personal reality. (2)

Powerful emotions such as anger or fear are often conditioned reflexes that are amplified by mental associations and conceptual thinking:

See that what you call "fear" is not fear. Fear is a sensation in your body and mind, a sensation you prevent yourself from feeling the moment you label it "fear." To arrive at the sensation, you must let go of the concept, the idea of fear, and then the perception will have an opportunity to reveal itself. The pure sensation of fear is only tension. Tension arises the moment you look at a situation from the point of view of an image, of a man or a woman, of a mother or father, of somebody's husband or wife, and the tension stimulates chemical, physical and psychic changes in the body-mind. But this tension can never be eliminated through analysis, through any process of reasoning, for he who undertakes analysis belongs to what is being analyzed. The mind can never change the mind. (3)

The powerful role of conditioning and indoctrination in human affairs has been known in certain cultures for many centuries. For instance, nearly eight hundred years before Pavlov, the Sufi teacher Al-Ghazali pointed out the nature and problem of conditioning. But it is only in recent years that the pervasive presence of conditioned behaviour has become recognized:

In spite of Pavlov and the dozens of books and reports of clinical studies into human behaviour made since the Korean war, the ordinary student of things of the mind is unaware of the power of indoctrination. One of the most striking peculiarities of contemporary man is that, while he now has abundant scientific evidence to the contrary, he finds it intensely difficult to understand that his beliefs are by no means always linked with either his intelligence, his culture or his values. He is therefore almost unreasonably prone to indoctrination. Indoctrination, in totalitarian societies, is something that is desirable providing that it furthers the beliefs of such societies. In other groupings its presence is scarcely even suspected. This is what makes almost anyone vulnerable to it. (4)

The various types of conditioning such as social, political, economic, religious or environmental have been aptly compared to a series of coloured filters which prevent a person from accurately perceiving reality:

From the time they are babies, people are conditioned socially, economically, politically, religiously, and in every possible way. They grow up in a society which is similarly affected. Eighty percent of the conditioning that they have received as they grow up comes out in their behaviour and attitude. Not all conditioning is bad: if it helps you in life, then it is still valuable whether you call it conditioning or experience. But if it is a conditioning which is telling you what to think, and how to react, it can be dangerous because it can ignore what one might call "internal feeling" or instinct. If you are a product of a certain form of intellectual or religious conditioning, it might be difficult to say "I don't completely accept this." (5)

Indoctrination and conditioning can produce a form of mind-manipulation that enslaves people, even without their knowledge. Propaganda, indoctrination and the engineering of belief are built on a narrow factual basis. Individuals and groups who try to condition others through propaganda, censorship of ideas and other means always resist opposition to their activities and attempts to broaden information and knowledge:

Indoctrination may be called "the instilling of attitudes without the saving grace of digesting them." What makes a "digested" system more acceptable than an imposed one? Two things. First, a greater time-scale and conditions of freedom give an opportunity for rejection. Second, where there is a time-scale measured in years – and where there is an opportunity for dissent and discussion – there is room for modification. Inducing people to believe things – and then, usually, turning around and saying that this belief, because it is belief, is sacred or even inevitable – is the hallmark of indoctrination. (6)

Coercive agency is a term which describes the powerful, but often unperceived, influence of ideas, social and cultural institutions and environment on everyday human behaviour. "Thoughts, circumstances, the social milieu, a hundred and one things, can provide as powerful coercive agencies as anything that the human being can point to as 'despotism' or 'tyranny'."

According to some systems of thought, the basic principles of human conditioning consist of a nucleus of underlying, self-supporting factors:

There are four factors which, when applied upon human beings, 'program' them like machines. These are the factors which are used in indoctrination and conditioning. By their use, deliberate or otherwise, self-applied or otherwise, the human mind is made more mechanical, and will tend to think along stereotyped lines. Innumerable experiments, recent and ancient, have fully verified the presence and effect of these factors. They are: tension alternating with relaxation, sloganisation and repetition. Because most human beings are trained to accept these factors as part of their 'learning' process, almost everything which is presented to a human being to be learned is generally converted by him into material which he applies by these methods. (7)

Not all conditioning is necessarily bad. Habits are functionally useful in areas where they work. However, habit and conditioning are counterproductive when they operate automatically and without flexibility. “The more often you do a thing, the more likely you are to do it again. There is no certainty that you will gain anything else from repetition than a likelihood of further repetition.”

One of the best ways of identifying and overcoming the power of conditioning is to examine one’s motives and intentions in a variety of life situations:

There is now a strong awareness that people may do things because of unconscious motives: being themselves unaware of the well-springs of their actions. Traditionally, of course, it has been realized by many cultures that ‘a man may be kicked by a superior and as a consequence kicks his donkey.’ The intention is not to hurt the donkey, or even to get the donkey to move. This is a case of motivation taking the place of intention: ‘false intention’ it might be termed. An observer, of course, will often attribute an intention to an action which he has witnessed, because of the desire to account for an action: ‘He kicked the donkey, therefore the donkey had done something wrong’; or: ‘His intention was evidently to get the donkey to move.’ (8)

The power of conditioning, mechanical training and indoctrination effectively blocks the operation of free will and choice in human beings. Gurdjieff discussed this idea in talks with his students in which he affirmed the possibility of developing a real free will:

Q: Has free will a place in your teaching?

A: Free will is the function of the real I, of him whom we call the Master. He who has a Master has a will. He who has not has no will. What is ordinarily called will is an adjustment between willingness and unwillingness. For instance, the mind wants something and the feeling does not want it; if the mind proves to be stronger than the feeling, a man obeys his mind. In the opposite case he will obey his feelings. This is what is called “free will” in an ordinary man. An ordinary man is ruled now by the mind, now by the feeling, now by the body. Very often he obeys orders coming from the automatic apparatus; a thousand times more often he is ordered about by the sex center. Real will can only be when one I always directs, when man has a Master for his team. An ordinary man has no master; the carriage constantly changes passengers and each passenger calls himself I. Nevertheless, free will is a reality, it does exist. But we, as we are, cannot have it. A real man can have it. (9)

Belief, Opinion and Ideology

The dominance of certain patterns of belief produces a form of “tunnel vision” and inculcates a habit of thinking only in a limited number of ways, thus reducing the potential for real learning. Simplistic, or ‘panacea’ thinking involves following creeds which are believed to provide all the answers and solve all problems. A classic Mulla Nasrudin story illustrates the power of narrow conditioned belief in the affairs of daily life:

Mulla Nasrudin was made a magistrate. During his first case the plaintiff argued so persuasively that he exclaimed: ‘I believe that you are right!’ The clerk of the court begged him to restrain himself, for the defendant had not been heard yet. Nasrudin was so carried away by the eloquence of the defendant that he cried out as soon as the man had finished his evidence: ‘I believe you are right!’ The clerk of the court could not allow this. ‘Your honour, they cannot both be right.’ ‘I believe that you are right!’ said Nasrudin. (10)

Most people are deeply attached to their opinions and beliefs, trapping them in rigid, conditioned patterns of thought and action, unable to respond freely to the reality of the present situation. “If you wish to see the truth, you must indeed hold no opinion for or against. Be like water, be fluid, at ease in any situation.”

Beliefs and opinions are often implanted by other people, social institutions or the mass media. Those who are entrained or conditioned by ideology typically manifest blinkered attitudes, lack of flexibility and dogmatic beliefs. They tend to form opinions about people, things and ideas on the basis of predetermined information and outright prejudice. Many of the commonly held beliefs of a community are “imagined facts” which do not correspond to actual reality:

If a large number of people believe something, do you imagine that it must be true? Probably not, unless you happen to be one of that number. If a large proportion of people believe something, then it is likely to be thought to be true. In most populations, there will not be very many dissentients. Until fairly recently people did not move around much: large majorities of people would continue for generations believing things to be true without very much likelihood that such beliefs – true or otherwise – would be disturbed. Although human mobility has increased, human assumptions have not kept pace. Human knowledge may have increased but human assumptions have remained fairly constant. There has not been enough time for people to realize how much is now known about human thought and behaviour which could explain ‘facts’ in a quite different way. (11)

People tend to believe all kinds of things, many of which are not true, either due to habit or because the source is a person of authority or importance. “Real belief is something else. Those who are capable of real belief are those who have experienced a thing.”

Do not ask people how they arrived at their opinions if you want the truth. By asking them you will only be entering into a game. They will only tell you what they think is true, or what they think you want to hear. Study, rather, what they say and how they say it; what they do and what influences have played upon them in the past. This is how you will find out, if it is necessary for you, how they have arrived at their opinions. (12)

Strong beliefs and feelings of certainty are usually indicative of obsession and indoctrination, not knowledge and understanding. "Belief does not have to have anything to do with truth. A thing may be true and believed because of indoctrination, or it may be true and believed by virtue of its truth."

'Being sure' and 'believing' each refers to various states of mind. Many people, for example, think that they are 'sure' when they are only obsessed. Others refer to their condition as 'believing' when they have merely been indoctrinated . . . Real belief comes after understanding. Once a thing is understood, it *must* be believed, because it now has the status of a fact. If, however, we are talking about 'belief' as something which can take place without understanding, or knowledge, this is really only a symptom for obsession. (13)

What most people consider to be truth is not such at all: in reality their version of truth is relative, temporal and constantly changing with the time and circumstances. Belief systems can be readily changed or converted to a new system of thought when certain psychological conditions are present and operative. "When someone's ideas begin to provide a less than adequate support for his sense of individual integrity and group cohesion, we get a reshaping of them around a new or improved concept. It is dissatisfaction and insecurity, a sense of the need for something, which precedes the condition known as conversion-syndrome."

Both belief and disbelief in religious, scientific and other fields are crude counterfeits of real knowledge and understanding:

Acceptance and rejection are much more often than is recognized just ways of amusing oneself. People, in other words, take pleasure in believing something or in disbelieving it, and the reasons why they supposedly accept or reject come later. These are what psychologists nowadays call 'rationalization.' The ideologue, whether in religion, politics or the advertising and selling of commodities, specializes in the engineering of belief. That is to say, he causes people to want things and to convince themselves that they want them for good reasons . . . But this kind of belief is ultimately not true, and there is a real version of which this is the counterfeit . . . The importance of the right kind of belief or faith cannot be over-stressed if it is realized that the wrong kind leads to a wasted life and the right kind alone leads to enlightenment. (14)

Modifying and Controlling Conditioning

The basic conditionings that occur through normal education, upbringing and social, economic and other influences are quite valuable and necessary within their proper sphere of action and expression. Most people obtain some degree of fulfilment through their present patterns of thought, behaviour and emotion. These are perfectly proper as long as they do not impede the development of higher possibilities. "Satisfactions obtained through one's own level of understanding are indeed legitimate, and there is no point in disturbing a stability of mind without anything more advanced being able to replace it."

A certain amount of conditioning is essential to physical survival and normal socialization. It is impossible, and pointless, to remove all conditioning from human life. "There is always a certain amount of cultural and biological conditioning. This belongs to our existence. Being free does not mean you negate, eliminate by will or refuse this conditioning. It means you are not identified with it, stuck in it."

Q: If everyone is conditioned from birth, how does one ever escape from his or her conditioning?

A: We can't live in the world without being conditioned. Even the control of one's bladder is conditioned. It is absurd to talk, as some do, of de-conditioned or non-conditioned people. But it is possible to see why conditioning has taken place and why a person's beliefs become oversimplified. Nobody is trying to abolish conditioning, merely to describe it, to make it possible to change it, and also to see where it needs to operate, and where it does not.

Q: Are you saying that when one comes to an awareness that he is conditioned, he can operate aside from it? He can say, "Why do I believe in this? Well, perhaps it is because . . ."

A: Exactly. Then he is halfway toward being liberated from his conditioning – or at least toward keeping it under control. People who say that we must smash conditioning are themselves oversimplifying things. (15)

The conditioning imposed on children by parents and society is useful only to a certain extent and must be supplemented by the freedom to learn without restrictions or boundaries. Although habits and conditioned behaviour are important and necessary in daily life, they need to be consciously controlled and directed rather than expressed mechanically. "The answer is not to break habits, because many habits are important. The solution is to guide the learner to a position in which he can both have habits and manage to operate without them."

Some degree of conditioning is necessary in almost all facets of human life, but only for certain purposes. Other purposes, for instance those connected with higher development, need other approaches:

No such systems deny the value of conditioning for certain purposes: but they themselves do not use it. They are not trying to destroy the conditioning mechanism, upon which, indeed, so much of life depends. This is the first lesson: People who are shown for the first time how their views are the product of conditioning tend to assume, in the crudest possible manner, that whoever told them this is himself opposed to conditioning, or proposes to do something about it. What any legitimate system will do, however, is to point out that conditioning is a part of the social scene and is confused with 'higher' things only at the point when a teaching has become deteriorated and has to 'train' its members. (16)

When we live from memory and past conditioning we miss the simple yet profound reality of the present moment:

These flowers are new at every moment but you make them the same. In reality every situation is entirely new. There may be an analogy between yesterday and today but there is no repetition. When you really understand this you will stop using old patterns to reconstruct your situations. Memory prevents you from seeing the bare facts. What you take for facts, for a real experience, are only reactions based on memory. Until the center of reference, the "me" is completely absent, you can never face facts. (17)

To fully experience life we must go beyond the boundaries created by habit, memory and conditioning and return to a state of natural awareness and perception. Human beings possess a natural sensitivity and intelligence that is free from the net of conditioning: "When you act according to your like and dislike, you live in the past and you are isolated from the present situation. Free from psychological memory, you are one with the situation, and the action in this situation leaves no residue."

Q: What is the best way to break habits?

A: First see that you act habitually. This seeing is not an intellectual taking note. It is a clear perception that the mechanism of habit comes from memory . . . When you project habits you are not open to life. Life presents itself in constant variation in you. When you see that life never repeats you will automatically leave the projection of patterns of security, which is all habits are. You will then be open to all life offers. When life refers directly to your emptiness of all representations, to your wholeness, there is right understanding of every situation.

Q: Does not a certain amount of habit belong to our biological survival, for example, eating, sleeping and exercising at certain times?

A: Feeling the rhythm of our body vehicle is not the same as habit. The organism looks to feel itself in a rhythm harmonious with the universe. Biological survival belongs to the rhythm of the universe. Habit belongs to psychological survival.
(18)

The shackles of past conditioning can only be overcome through immediate insight and direct understanding. This arises through a way of perceiving life that is “totally fresh and uncaused, undetermined, and not dependent on anything. It happens on its own when a human being is deeply involved in wondering and questioning about oneself and one’s entire relationship with others and the whole world.”

Bare attention and open awareness act like a beam of light to transform negative states of mind. “Unconscious mind patterns that create suffering tend to come to an end simply by making them conscious, by becoming aware of them as they happen.”

You must free perception, let it unfold in your awareness. Then a transformation takes place on every level. All the energy that was dispersed and localized in fixed habits becomes freed and re-orchestrated. Each circumstance calls for a re-harmonizing of energy that is perfectly adequate to the situation. In the complete re-orchestration that takes place, the energy that was previously dispelled in psychological time “returns” and vanishes in our timeless presence. (19)

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