

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES

'If you deal with society you must accept its ways, for its ways are your ways. Your needs and demands have created them. Your desires are so complex and contradictory – no wonder the society you create is also complex and contradictory.'

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

The Power of Social and Cultural Pressure

In ordinary life people are prey to cultural and social influences of many kinds. Some of these are clearly identified and acknowledged, but others are unperceived or regarded as something entirely different, such as inevitabilities, absolutes, fixed laws and so on. Each culture maintains certain patterns of thought and behaviour in order to establish and preserve itself. These act to effectively limit or attenuate the perceptions and activity of the community.

The members of all communities, including nations and whole civilizations, are infused with the prevailing ideologies of those communities. These, in turn, create attitudes of mind which include certain capacities and equally positively exclude others. The ideologies may be so ancient, so deep-seated or so subtle that they are not identified as such by the people at large. (1)

Most cultures are predicated on a world-view or 'consensus reality' based on certain assumed absolutes which inform and modify the structure and products of the culture, including individuals, institutions and schools of thought. These determine the relative value and worth of objects, people and ideas. "For example, the value of such things as money, gold, silver, diamonds, and collectibles of all kinds is established by relative truths . . . What makes stamps valuable is simply their widespread demand created by informal, consensus agreement."

Societies are self-restrictive primarily due to the nature of their assumptions and beliefs. Customs, conventions and social pressures can easily become enshrined in human organizations and institutions, and become unrecognized coercive agents in the life and experience of an individual, social group or community. The values and assumptions of a society are accepted principles established in the mental set of the people, often without any critical evaluation or questioning:

If you belong to a community which has made certain assumptions about life and society, and even knowledge, you will find that the community constitutes a stable entity so long as it does not question its basic assumptions. This may inhibit progress . . . In any society stabilized upon a whole range of interlocking assumptions, many of which really do seem to verify one another, there is a

sense of coherence and strength which is naturally highly prized by its members. This is, of course, because the individuals are not autonomous enough to be alone for long. This desire to identify oneself by group-association is so strong that when one social grouping breaks down it is normal for it to be succeeded by another ideology offering similar facilities for reassurance and an adequate world view. This is the familiar story of national cultural history. And it has its parallels in the individual. (2)

The search for comfort and reassurance preoccupies the members of dependence-oriented cultures. In the sphere of social activity, most people will try to “fit in” and conform in order to feel comfortable and accepted. In most contemporary societies people will only follow the suggestions and directions of well-established types of figures (so-called leaders and opinion-makers). This is a form of inflexibility which blunts progress towards learning. “For whole populations, thoughts, words and actions are the result of internalized ideology: frozen intention originating from others.”

The inner dynamic of many characteristic institutions of a culture may not be readily apparent to members of that culture. Unless their true nature is noted, they will “continue to be perceived by people of that culture as whatever their outward shape says they are.”

It is because the social appearance of the institution is social, political, educational, vocational, and so on, that the ground-plan, the structure is seldom noted at all. If someone says that such-and-such a body is for learning, people seldom imagine that it is really social, and so on. There are certain exceptions, when people notice that students at evening classes are very often there to fill in time or to make friends rather than to learn; or when there are putatively sporting, say, or religious associations where the social side has gone so far as to be regarded as integrally important, or even vital, to its functioning . . . You should note, however, that it is often possible to combine two or more of these factors without particularly harming the enterprise: for instance, if you are trying to raise money for charity, you may be able to do it better in a social atmosphere or among commercial associates. The points being made are that, first, it is valuable to *know* the relative quantity of various ingredients, social, attention-attracting or developmental, so that the organization can be understood; secondly, that certain enterprises will suffer if the ingredients get out of proportion. (3)

Negative beliefs and attitudes are passed on to children through their parents and elders, a process that blunts full human growth and understanding:

A child learns from its parents and those adults who surround it. It learns not only the positive injunctions of problem-solving which their elders think they are teaching it. In addition it is learning to emulate the parents; and it emulates their defeatism. This includes their rationalizations of why they do not attempt

certain tasks, why they are 'too tired,' or such-and-such an effort is not 'worth-while.' This is as true in the individual as it is in society. Nobody on record had run a four-minute mile before someone did it. After that, because the unspoken taboo had been beaten, it became more and more common. A similar process takes place in children learning, perhaps sometimes without words, not to make a certain effort, an effort of will or of experiment. (4)

The structure, belief-patterns and influences of our social milieu are reflections of the unhealthy psychological makeup of the majority of the human community:

Our society today emphasizes the fractional personality which is the origin of competition, achieving, aggression, war. We are encouraged to be more and more specialized. It takes us away from our real global nature. But domination, assertion and manipulation can never bring wisdom and a healthy society. On the contrary, the light of wisdom, love and harmony is concealed by the personality and its qualifications. Our society is living in the dark. But love and wisdom are infinitely patient, unchanged, ever there since before time. (5)

Social Conformity and Automatism

Throughout most of human history separate and diverse cultures lived independently of each other, insulated from the values and beliefs of competing cultures. But today, in our interconnected world of mass communication and mutual interchange, it is no longer possible for societies and cultures to maintain a distinct and exclusive character.

The beliefs, assumptions and activities of most contemporary cultures produce a general uniformity and homogeneity, converting human beings into virtually identical automatons or 'machines.' Through education and conditioning, people are trained to imitate and copy others: "Mimicry is trying to look like someone or something else instead of looking, feeling or being like *oneself*."

Supposing for a moment that you were not yourself, but a visitor among men, ignorant of their ways of behaving and their elaborate habits of self-deception. One of the first things which you would notice is that a large part of people's time is spent in thinking and acting just like other people, while at the same time they energetically claim that they are 'different.' You would conclude that this predilection stemmed from a warp of thinking, and was a serious barrier to making use even of the things which they do understand. (6)

Although different communities and cultures appear to have distinct outward forms and appearances, the inner psychological dynamic is often surprisingly similar:

Ordinary communities come into being, grow, develop, die and regenerate in certain very similar patterns. People think that these communities are different from one another because of outward shapes. But they have characteristics which utilize human tendencies like self-esteem, greed, the desire to receive approval (or, failing that, attention of any sort) and so on. Unable or unwilling to resist a community's demands for these and other satisfactions, almost all the leaders of human groups have, knowingly or otherwise, made use of them. The inevitable result has been that almost all human groupings – whatever their overt aims – structurally resemble one another. They are, or rapidly become, manifestations of the same characteristics. They only masquerade as being 'in search of knowledge,' or as 'uplifting the people,' or as 'spreading information,' even as 'increasing wealth and prosperity.' This is because they are only able to appear to do such things as long as the individuals and mass of the community are gaining or being promised some lower satisfaction. This fact has been observed, only too well, by sociologists and psychologists. It is so marked that these experts have gone so far as to believe that no human community can come about, progress or survive unless it panders to the lower human proclivities. If this were so, there would be no hope for the human race. (7)

Habits and conforming social behaviour produces a sense of familiarity and predictability which may prevent higher growth and development:

The shackles of poverty and oppression are visible to the ordinary eye, and it is not hard to find agreement in sympathy for those thus afflicted. Often, however, people – and peoples – are chained by shackles that they in fact treasure. As one Zen master said, it is hard for people to see anything wrong with that they like, or to see anything good in what they do not like. Another Zen master noted that familiarity itself is a quality that people are generally inclined to like. This means that predilections and habits with which people feel comfortable at a given time may serve them for comfort but may in fact be holding them back from greater capacity for progress and fulfillment. (8)

Materialism and Consumerism

Competitiveness and the pursuit of "more and more" are the sacred gods of our materialistically driven society. Our contemporary world largely functions on the basis of transactionalism in the form of a "supply-and-demand" mechanism. Materialistic societies are one-sided in nature and characterized by manipulation and conditioning. In a world of advertising and mass communication every effort is directed toward making people believe that they want or need certain things. In the words of Zen teacher Philip Kapleau: "We have become mere cogs in a wheel that is spinning out of control, living in a value system that does not see the person as a human being but merely as a consumer of things."

Virtually all organizations known to you work largely by means of your greed. They attract you because what they say or do appeals to your greed. This is concealed only by their appearance. If you stop listening to their words and look at the effect, you will soon see it. (9)

Our contemporary Western way of life places an undue emphasis on materialism and the physical aspect of reality. The world is seen in a different light when the perspective and valuation rests on spiritual rather than on material considerations. For instance, much of the activity of con-temporary society is driven by the pursuit of money. Money and material advantages can be administered wisely or selfishly depending on one's spiritual understanding and maturity:

Q: I find I worry a lot about money. Is this justified?

A: You are not the owner of what you have. You are the administrator. When you are an administrator and not an owner you'll behave completely differently because you are free from it. You will utilize it differently according to the actual situation and not with a view to accumulation. Spend money graciously!

Q: How can we know how much we need? I have a family and tend to worry about the future.

A: When you come to know yourself you come to a hierarchy of value. As you no longer emphasize the phenomenal, you use the world completely differently. Don't associate yourself with a competitive, productive society that constantly creates needs, new elements for survival. Our society is bound to consumerism. It is a completely artificial creation. Don't spend too much time working for money to accumulate. You should be able to work three or four days a week or have half the day to live in beauty. When you have a family the present has a certain extension. How far it goes only you know, but don't live in the future. (10)

People are led to believe that the ownership of material objects is riches and the physical absence of things is poverty. In reality the truly 'rich' are those who are independent of poverty: those who do not care if they are poor or not poor. The so-called commercial society conditions people to such an extent that a sheep-like mentality prevails. When ambition and desire are over-emphasized, other values and possibilities of development are ignored:

We are living in a world where certain orientations are so common that we don't know that we are their prisoner. There is all the difference in the world between your ambition commanding you, and you commanding it. Now that so many human difficulties have been surmounted, man- and womankind is in a position to give attention to those possibilities of human flexibility which previously had no 'cash value' and hence were underdeveloped. (11)

The consequences of rampant materialism and unrestricted growth are dire for our planet, its myriad forms of life and its human inhabitants:

The contamination of our own and the world's environment and our squandering of dwindling natural resources through over-consumption, waste or mismanagement speak eloquently of our greed and irresponsibility. How long will the rest of the world stand by while we in North America, with only 6 percent of the world's population, consume 40% of its resources? However much our self-indulgent living habits have contributed to the world's energy shortage and to pollution and inflation, these ailments are but outward manifestations of our inner malaise. (12)

Propaganda, Indoctrination and Conditioning

People from all cultures in our contemporary world are conditioned by a constellation of impacts and experiences. "In most human societies, unanimity of thought has been arrived at by an unrecognized conditioning process in which virtually all the society's institutions may be branches of the conditioning process." Almost all types of human groupings and organizations utilize conditioning of one form or another. "They instill into people a limited range of beliefs and require certain automatic practices. Unknowingly, the people concerned (which can include the instillers) become 'servants' of the system."

Until comparatively recently most people lived in mutually exclusive communities, isolated from one another. Social science and psychology were in their infancy or excluded, and in general, multicultural communities had little access to single-culture ones, which latter effectively dominated the world. But a new situation, unprecedented in its spread and urgency, arose with the discovery and wide publication of the phenomena of conditioning and indoctrination. When confronted with this new knowledge, few extant cultures could explain why conditioning was necessary, or why so many well-established belief systems were indistinguishable from brainwashing ones. (13)

Many of the values and beliefs of a culture are transmitted through indoctrination posing as learning and education. There is a general distortion of understanding produced by the implanting of cultural biases and the programming of the people's thoughts and behaviour. Attitudes and opinions can be moulded and conditioned into people by other people. In the Western world, a great deal of time is spent in the social engineering of belief, conviction and commitment. There is an important saying: *'When you are most convinced; that is the time to use caution about your certainty.'*

Ideological thinking is a form of mental indoctrination, lacking flexibility, open-mindedness and a comprehensive perspective. When narrow racial and nationalistic tendencies are un-

checked they undermine the stability and safety of all countries and peoples of the world. "Ideology drives people into absurd forms of thought and behaviour. Beware of it, because it attempts to apply mechanical concepts to human development." It is important to be able to distinguish between real causes and those conditioned by pressure and propaganda. There is an ancient saying: *'However useful a garment, it is not for eating.'*

Q: What do you think of nationalism?

A: Biological survival includes the community, language, rituals, customs and so on. Culture is an extension of the individual, so in a sense the deep urge to protect the culture is part of biological survival. But nationalism is based on idealism. It is an abstraction, a fabrication. It is collective psychological survival. The protective instinct of biological survival has a certain limit, the limit of physical security. It is impossible that biological survival alone could lead to grand-scale war. The limits of psychological survival, on the other hand, are less defined. Psychological survival stems from the mind and will go as far as the mind goes. (14)

The process and effects of conditioning permeate modern societies and cultures to an extent unimagined by the average person. Yet it is a fundamental, though largely unrecognized, force in almost all forms of human life. "Virtually all human societies are based upon, and their continuity and growth are reinforced by, the use of hope, fear and repetition . . . The structure is employed in every type of organization: whether tribal, national, political, religious, recreational, educational or other."

At the human level, much conditioning occurs in the form of indoctrination, brainwashing, "hypnosis," and thought control. Through the process of socialization, we are subtly and effectively trained to believe or think certain things. Few of us realize that almost all our opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (not to mention behaviours) are those implanted in us by our society. We rarely stop to consider what it is we are doing or saying, and why. The power of social pressure, enculturation, imitation and conformity is much greater than we are willing to acknowledge. We believe we have free will (which we do), but much less of it is utilized than we self-deceptively believe. It might be more accurate to say that we have the potential for free will but rarely exercise it. (15)

Indoctrination and conditioning, which is such a decisive factor in human belief, involves both the giving and withholding of information, leading to "untenable attitudes, confusion and a breakdown in communication."

Man is easily conditioned and many of his ills and woes in all ages are due to this inherence. The root cause of this 'conditionability' is man's incapacity for handling information. Indoctrination campaigns involve the giving of information. They also involve the withholding of information. In a real sense, people

form their opinion from a *lack of data*. They need more information but they need, also, to be prepared for the difficulty of handling it. They do not understand that they need more information nor do they understand that if they were given it, they would probably reject it. (16)

Power Structures and Authoritarianism

The political and economic structures in the world today produce tension, fear and social imbalances which are detrimental to higher human growth and development. "Present-day economic and political situations are producing enormous tension almost everywhere in the world, and tension is the great enemy: it blocks the balanced and harmonious transmission of energy and it prevents its harmonious use." One of the clearest examples of the misuse of power is humanity's attitude toward and exploitation of the resources of the natural world:

The notion of power grows inevitably out of a dualistic interpretation of reality. When dualism neglects to recognize the presence of an integrating principle behind it, its native penchant for destruction exhibits itself rampantly and wantonly. One of the most conspicuous examples of this display of power is seen in the Western attitude toward Nature. Westerners talk about conquering Nature and never about befriending her. They climb a high mountain and they declare the mountain is conquered. (17)

There is a widespread human need for authority and leadership, regardless of whether they are needed or not. Yet many leaders are really only followers, reflecting "the ongoing tide of concern and events already proceeding within the populace itself." It is important to identify and understand the nature of 'power structures' in organizations and situations where they exist. "When people in authority have the reputation of being kind and soft-hearted, others assume (quite wrongly) that the pressure exerted by such people is not pressure at all."

People try to exercise power upon those 'below' them. But people upon whom power is supposed to be being exercised are, in fact, by frustrating the effect of the power, themselves exercising power. Power situations can only exist where there is a contract, arrived at voluntarily or otherwise, in which people will do things or else things can be made difficult for them. "Do this or I will make you uncomfortable' is the formula for both types of power: the power exerted by people above on those below, and the power exerted from the people below upon those above. Where there is no contract – where one party can do without the other – *no power situation can exist*. (18)

Most people, individually and collectively, will attack and persecute others who say and do things which are perceived as threatening. "Anyone who says or writes anything which seems to conflict with the true or false beliefs of a community or any part of it deliberately accepts the

risk of being misunderstood and vilified and perhaps punished.” The exercise of authority comes with certain responsibilities in order for the function of power to be properly carried out. “There is nobody more trivial than a person in authority who spends his time telling others what to do and who does not do things himself.”

Although in many societies and cultures restrictions are imposed on what people can write, say or do, there is a limit to the effectiveness of this process of censorship. “Even in cultures where authoritarianism and mechanical thinking have choked comprehensive understanding, human individuality will have to assert itself.” The exercise of power and authority to accomplish goals and objectives is ultimately self-defeating as power is blind and operates within an ever-narrowing horizon. D.T. Suzuki: “Power represents destruction, even self-destruction, quite contrary to love’s creativeness. Love dies and lives again, while power kills and is killed.”

The real truth is that love is not opposed to power; love belongs to an order higher than power, and it is only power that imagines itself to be opposed to love. In truth, love is all-enveloping and all-forgiving; it is a universal solvent, an infinitely creative and resourceful agent. As power is always dualistic and therefore rigid, self-assertive, destructive, and annihilating, it turns against itself and destroys itself when it has nothing to conquer. This is in the nature of power, and is it not this that we are witnessing today, particularly in our international affairs? What is blind is not love but power, for power utterly fails to see that its existence is dependent upon something else. It refuses to realize that it can be itself only by allying itself to something infinitely greater than itself. Not knowing this fact, power plunges itself straight into the pit of self-destruction. (19)

Restricting Human Possibilities and Development

Contemporary cultures are the recipients of both the wisdom and the failings of previous generations. “It is the stupidity and shallowness of some of our forebears which punishes us, just as much as the endowment of the wiser ones offers us opportunities.” Most human societies have been limited by conventions and belief systems which have mitigated against an advanced mystical and spiritual understanding of humanity.

Until very recently human institutions have tended to be what can only be called restrictive. That is to say, although they want to increase information and to develop capacities, they leave great areas unstudied. There is a disposition to assume that certain attitudes must not be taken up in their particular system, otherwise such attitudes might threaten the stability or even the very life of the sacrosanct institution. The result of this narrowing of the thinking is to make the person involved in it *less* effective, *more* mechanical. (20)

Human systems tend to concentrate on a narrow range of possibilities directly related to their aim. This process automatically excludes other, potentially very valuable directions and opportunities:

The fact is, of course, that for practical purposes *all* systems which exist for furthering a purpose also succeed, almost by definition, in excluding many other possibilities: unless *you* add the extra dimensions – the system won't work. You may make a lot of money in a business, but this can be at the expense of developing your interests in other directions. If you go in for clinical research, you may not be able to do as much therapy as otherwise might be possible. If you need the social support given you by any kind of a system to which you belong to an extreme degree, you will be inhibited from leaving it, even temporarily, in order to do things in areas where there is no social support: thus reducing your effectiveness. This means that you will be unable to go forward because your needs command you to spin on your own axis to maintain some kind of equilibrium. (21)

The assumptions of society and the effect of dominating institutions and ideas can effectively prevent and inhibit the development of real understanding. Cultural assumptions and beliefs define our reality and limit human capacity. In the ordinary world, people are trained and conditioned to operate and learn in ways connected with only a small range of ambitions and desires, a process which helps to vitiate higher ranges of perception and understanding. Most human beings see only the surface effects of economic, political and social tension and are unable to perceive the hidden pattern of spiritual laws which underlie these phenomena:

The average person looking out on this ever-changing world sees anything but natural karmic laws at work; nor does he see the unity and harmony underlying this constant and inevitable change. If anything, he is filled with fear and anxiety, with a feeling of hopelessness, and with a sense that life has no meaning. And because he has no concrete insight into the true character of the world or intuitive understanding of it, what else can he do but surrender to a life of material comfort and sensual pleasure. (22)

The mental framework of modern thought is largely a scientific and technological one. It produces an intellectual climate which is self-limiting and in order to grow requires the challenge of a variety of many-sided and many-levelled insights drawn from traditional spiritual teachings for further human progress:

The Sufis use a new point of view in order to overcome the conditioning which our materialistic society has imposed. Our ills are due mainly to the one-sided rationalism of our culture and the loss of the intuitive faculty that would have enabled us to gain access to an area of knowledge which cannot be reached through the intellectual mechanism. They believe that for the first time in history

conscious evolution has ceased to be a choice open to man and has become a necessity on which our future depends. (23)

There is a natural progression in the maturation of a human being which is mirrored by the level of development of communities, institutions and organizations. The three stages of human growth – infancy, adolescence and adulthood – provide a framework for describing the stages of community growth. The first stage of infancy is equivalent to the expansion of territory and influence in the life of the community, and the second stage of adolescence by the creation and concentration of industrial and commercial empires.

The third type, which is the final phase, and the most effective and constructive, is an organization which can contribute in so many fields that it cannot be singled out as an enemy, or even as a friend, for its members come from every section of every community. By providing positive and demonstrable gains in such diverse fields as literature, commerce, art, science, psychology and human thought and social relations, it permeates throughout the interstices of the existing relatively crude systems. (24)

Many traditional spiritual teachings offer a spiritually-based alternative to the dominant materialistic societies and cultures of the modern world:

The Buddhist Way, with its compassion, equanimity, tolerance, concern for self-reliance and responsibility – above all, its Cosmic view – can be a model for society. What are needed are political and economic relations and a technology that will: (1) help people to overcome ego-centeredness through cooperation with others instead of subordination, exploitation and competition; (2) offer to each a freedom that is conditional only upon the freedom of others, so that individuals may develop a self-reliant social responsibility rather than being the conditioned pawns of institutions and ideologies; (3) concern themselves primarily with the material and social conditions of personal growth and only secondarily with material production. (25)

The antidote for the ills of contemporary civilization is, to a large degree, a return to a more natural, organic life in harmony with all creation:

We need to recover our basic humanity. The choice before us is clear: a disciplined life of simplicity and naturalness or a contrived and artificial one; a life in harmony with the natural order of things or one in constant conflict with it. It is a choice of freedom or bondage and decay. But even having chosen the way of regeneration, to walk this path requires spiritual training and discipline. Only through purifying the heart and mind of each of us can we hope to purify the world and restore a measure of peace and stability in our global community. (26)

As the spiritual life ripens there is a natural reorientation and simplification of behaviour in response to the challenges of everyday life. As awareness deepens, the pull of the outer world of society and culture weakens, allowing for a more authentic, natural human being to emerge. "You wash your hands, you dress yourself, you perform everyday actions as before, but now you are *aware* of all your actions, words and thoughts."

As the desire for the spiritual increases, all social life becomes less binding, and a much simpler adaptation is sooner or later established. As soon as man really awakens to spiritual life, certain incompatible conditions become unbearable, unacceptable, and he then lets go of certain things, he changes his profession, he re-adapts himself; such a re-adaptation must be neither forced nor willed and, above all, not anticipated. It happens naturally and spontaneously as the spiritual orientation asserts itself clearly. (27)

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