

PATTERNS OF HUMAN THINKING

'Offer a donkey a salad, and he will ask what kind of thistle it is.'

Saying

Assumptions and Preconceptions

The power of assumptions and preconceptions is aptly illustrated by the traditional story of the "Blind Ones and the Elephant," in which each blind person clings to their limited perceptions and understanding, thereby jumping to false conclusions:

Beyond Ghor there was a city. All its inhabitants were blind. A king with his entourage arrived nearby; he brought his army and camped in the desert. He had a mighty elephant, which he used in attack and to increase the people's awe. The populace became anxious to see the elephant, and some sightless from among this blind community ran like fools to find it. As they did not even know the form or shape of the elephant they groped sightlessly, gathering information by touching some part of it. Each thought that he knew something, because he could feel a part. When they returned to their fellow-citizens eager groups clustered around them. They asked about the form, the shape of the elephant; and listened to all that they were told.

The man whose hand had reached an ear was asked about the elephant's nature. He said: 'It is a large, rough thing, wide and broad, like a rug.'

And the one who had felt the trunk said: 'I have the real facts about it. It is like a straight and hollow pipe, awful and destructive.'

The one who had felt its feet and legs said: 'It is mighty and firm, like a pillar.'

Each had felt one part out of many. Each had perceived it wrongly. No mind knew all: knowledge is not a companion of the blind. All imagined something, something incorrect. (1)

A common assumption in the human community is that existing ideas must necessarily be right. The consequences of certain assumptions can be made to "prove" those assumptions. This produces pseudo-certainty and is a substitute for real knowledge and understanding. "Magical thinking assumes that because something happens in conjunction with something else, the two are connected. Thus, when a magically-minded person sees a flight of birds followed by a flash of lightning, he or she may imagine that birds cause electricity."

Most individuals tend to assess phenomena on the basis of assumptions, preconceptions and predetermined categories of thought. Much of our ordinary thinking is based on conditioning and overlaid by assumptions, thus preventing the emergence of real knowledge and true understanding. "False assumptions, reinforced by greed and other subjectivities, are the barriers to knowledge." For example:

You look at a house. The general and particular characteristics of that house are split up into smaller elements and assessed in your brain. But not objectively – only in accordance with your past experiences. These experiences in modern man include what he has been told. Thus the house will be big or small, nice or not so nice; like your own or not like it. In greater detail, it will have a roof like another, it will have windows which are unusual. The machine is going around in circles, because it is merely adding to its formal knowledge. What I am trying to convey is that you assess things in accordance with preconceived ideas. (2)

One of the fundamental assumptions of most human beings is that everyone experiences the same physical and metaphysical reality. But this is not borne out by facts:

Q: Surely there is a factual world common to all.

A: The world of things, of energy and matter? Even if there were such a common world of things and forces, it is not the world in which we live. Ours is a world of feelings and ideas, of attractions and repulsions, of scales of values, of motives and incentives; a mental world altogether. Biologically we need very little; our problems are of a different order. Problems created by desires and fears and wrong ideas can be solved only on the level of the mind. You must conquer your own mind and for this you must go beyond it. (3)

Cultural assumptions and lack of information prevent researchers from entering areas of study which are not familiar to the Western mind. “People’s assumptions about things deprive them of a fresh range of experience.” And assumptions which apply in the ordinary physical world may not hold true in the differently ordered metaphysical realm.

The dangers of facile assumptions and hidden biases are stressed in many spiritual teachings. “A ‘rational’ decision may be nothing of the sort, but a consequence of the workings of selective factors operating outside the normal range of consciousness, or where the interpretation of a certain situation, obvious to an outside observer, has become inverted.”

To illustrate the influence of assumptions, preconceptions and hidden prejudices, it may be necessary to apply a “shock” in the form of a challenge. Teaching stories and humour are often used in this way in spiritual circles to highlight the dangers of self-deception caused by unexamined and unwarranted assumptions. In the Sufi tradition, the humorous adventures of the ‘wise fool’ Mulla Nasrudin are often used to illustrate this all too frequent possibility. “Many of the Mulla Nasrudin stories show the Mulla in a situation dominated by false assumptions and defective logic. Sometimes these pieces appear extraordinarily amusing – a sure sign that the reader himself is subject to the operation of the self-same flaws, though he might be quite unaware of when they are actually operating in his life.”

Self-deception and unfounded assumptions are held to prevent the attainment of higher knowledge. There is a tale which is used to illustrate this. Nasrudin says: 'the king addressed me.' Everyone is impressed, because they assume that something important must have been said. In fact, however, the king had only said: 'get out of my way!' In this story the assumption is laid bare. So is the self-deception, because the listener deceives himself into thinking that something important must have happened. In real life, man does not carry his thinking through to the point where he will see that he deceives himself: in this case by feeling interested that he knows someone who has been spoken to by a king. (4)

When our thoughts are compulsive and memory-based, conditioned and repetitive, we lose sight of the essential simplicity and flexibility of our natural mind and awareness:

Usually our mind is very busy and complicated, and it is difficult to be concentrated on what we are doing. This is because before we act we think, and this thinking leaves some trace. Our activity is shadowed by some preconceived idea. The thinking not only leaves some trace or shadow, but also gives us many other notions about other activities and things. These traces and notions make our minds very complicated. When we do something with a quite simple, clear mind, we have no notions or shadows, and our activity is strong and straightforward. But when we do something with a complicated mind, in relation to other things or people, or society, our activity becomes very complex. (5)

Mental Habits and Conventional Thinking

The ways in which people think of and evaluate the world around them are surprisingly similar across disparate communities and cultures:

There is a widespread notion in non-traditional societies such as the current Western one, that their scientific base causes the people to think, for some reason, in a way different from that of 'ancient' or 'Eastern' peoples. Anthropologists, interestingly enough, have pointed out that human thinking habits are everywhere very similar, and that the models and assumptions used by, say, Africans of old and the Europeans and Americans are not all different. The fact that this expert information has not filtered down to general knowledge is in itself an indication of the contention of, for example, R. Horton, who commented on the unexamined assumptions of Western and African people thus: "The (Western) layman's ground for accepting the models propounded by the scientist is often no different from the young African villager's ground for accepting the models propounded by one of his elders. In both these cases they are deferred to as the accredited agents of tradition. As for the rules which guide scientists themselves in the acceptance or rejection of models, these seldom

become part of the intellectual equipment of members of the wider population. For all the apparent up-to-dateness of the content of his world-view, the modern Western layman is rarely more 'open' or scientific in his outlook than is the traditional African villager." (6)

Our world view is conditioned and limited by our language, education and cultural traditions. "To serve their purpose, names and terms must of necessity be fixed and definite like all other units of measurement. But there is a danger in confusing these representations of reality with the fluidity of life, much like trying to catch water in a sieve."

We have taken a restricted view of human knowledge. For us, almost all knowledge is what a Taoist would call *conventional* knowledge, because we do not feel that we really know anything unless we can represent it to ourselves in words, or in some other system of conventional signs such as the notations of mathematics or music. Such knowledge is called conventional because it is a matter of social agreement as to the codes of communication. Just as people speaking the same language have tacit agreements as to what words shall stand for what things, so the members of every society and every culture are united by bonds of communication resting upon all kinds of agreement as to the classification and valuation of actions and things. (7)

When the mind is properly used it functions as an instrument or tool to deal effectively with the world. But thinking can easily become dysfunctional and negative, much like a speeding train out of control. "Most people are completely identified with the incessant stream of mind, of compulsive thinking, most of it repetitive and pointless."

The greater part of most people's thinking is involuntary, automatic, and repetitive. It is no more than a kind of mental static and fulfills no real purpose. Strictly speaking you don't think: Thinking happens to you. The statement "I think" implies volition. It implies that you have a say in the matter, that there is a choice involved on your part. For most people, this is not yet the case. "I think" is just as false a statement as "I digest" or "I circulate my blood." Digestion happens, circulation happens, thinking happens. (8)

Knowledge derived from words and concepts is secondary, incomplete and dependent upon memory. It is important to remember that "the menu is not the meal" and "the map is not the territory."

All your activities depend on the mind, and the mind in turn depends on all your memories and whatever you have heard in this world. We are absorbing whatever happens in this world, and we are also looking at it from our own point of view, putting our own concepts on those things . . . You accept certain things as good and virtuous, and reject others as bad or sinful, but these are only the concepts you have acquired in the world, and there is no basis for the distinction. (9)

Most of our thinking proceeds not by conscious effort and direction but by the impact of random associations and memory:

We think by chance associations, when our thought strings disconnected scenes and memories together, when everything that falls within the field of our consciousness, or merely touches it lightly, calls up these chance associations in our thought. The string of thoughts seems to go on uninterrupted, weaving together fragments or representations of former perceptions, taken from different recordings in our memories. And these recordings turn and unwind while our thinking apparatus deftly weaves its threads of thought continuously from this material. (10)

Our existing stock of knowledge and information acts as a “filter” through which we judge incoming impressions, ideas and intuitions. The desire for order leads to rendering things into an existing framework or system based on associations and similarities. “When faced by something it does not know, the human mind displays an almost indecent haste with which a label is sought and applied.”

Our heads are filled with ‘knowledge,’ a knowledge that in some areas pre-empts our seeing anything at all; or being truly aware of any part of the world that surrounds us. Everything arrives in our understanding already packaged and labelled. How are we to take the wrapping off and test the truth of the labels? The fact is that we are in no condition to do so: we are helplessly hidden from ourselves, even when we attempt to discover what we really are, since the imperfections that we are trying to seek out exist in the very perceptions with which we search for them. It is as though we looked for the colour red through spectacles fitted with a red filter. Until the filter is removed we cannot see what is certainly there, but hidden from us. (11)

The human brain has a tendency to set up patterns based on prior or familiar experience. New or unfamiliar situations are misinterpreted in light of pre-existing patterns, and genuinely new experiences are rarely recognized for what they are:

The advantage of the brain’s pattern information system includes “quickness of recognition and hence quickness of reaction.” This allows for greater efficiency in exploring and relating to one’s familiar environment. However, the disadvantages are legion, including patterns becoming rigid (as they control attention) and once established becoming extremely difficult to modify. “Gestalts” tend to occur, all too frequently, which implies that patterns showing some resemblance to a standard pattern tend to be perceived as the standard pattern itself (stereotyping). (12)

Mental habits may be useful or useless depending on the context in which they are used and applied. "Things which might be admissible under one set of circumstances are often turned into 'perennial truths'."

Habit of mind is at one and the same time one of the most useful and most useless instruments when approaching problems. If you choose the right approach, you may solve the problem. But if you cannot choose it, and only obey it, you may not be using the best habit for the purpose. The habit which possesses present-day thinking is generally to assume that a disciplined approach will solve all problems. This is run a close second by its opposite: the beguiling but equally partial belief that if discipline is lost, insights are gained. Neither approach, when adopted as certain to provide a solution, will succeed in areas where the mechanical mind or the incoherent one, dominate thinking. (13)

People frequently draw incorrect conclusions from partial or coincidental data. Conclusions which are based on a strictly logical extension of observed facts may not correspond with reality. "If you assign a significance to a limited array of factors you are in trouble if it happens that there are other factors which you haven't heard of. If you think all soup has lumps in it you will fail to recognize soup without them."

Generalizing from insufficient material produces faulty assessment and understanding. The problem of generalization is the attempt to deduce a law applicable to one situation or circumstance from a totally different situation. "Generalizations are useful, even essential, in certain situations, dangerous in others. The intelligent use of generalizations include using them, modifying them and superseding them."

Certain ideas may be interpreted out of all proportion to their original intention by those who generalize from specific instances. People who believe in the reality of absolutes become prisoners of their belief. "In psychology as in physics, something which acts as an absolute for some purposes may not do so for others."

Many people are impressed by the example that if they look at something for half a minute, they will find their attention wandering. Instead of looking at this as an indication of fact, complete in itself, they do two unnecessarily shallow things: they (1) try to look at things for long periods in the hope that they will be able to develop attention capacity. They never achieve it, however, when they try in this manner, because the description of the deficiency does not, of course, contain the technique; (2) immediately assume that the person who drew their attention is able to supply them with the method or system whereby they can remedy the situation. They seldom seem to imagine that, if a man says, "This door is splintered" he does not necessarily know how to mend it. (14)

The binary mode of thinking (either/or) is valuable for many purposes but destructive in other circumstances. When not properly used, the 'either/or' mentality effectively blocks out alternatives and more subtle differentiations.

Most human institutions are based on the binary mode 'either-or.' Faced with almost any situation, the human being will automatically decide, as quickly as possible, whether to accept or reject it. This provides a useful tool for ordinary learning and indoctrination, but when it becomes the only mode of approach to a situation it effectively screens the individual from other perceptions, other areas of experience where this mode is absent. The attempt at introducing a middle way (indecision, evaluation, and so on) only imports an uncertainty into the situation, and does not constitute the establishment of a third specific potentiality which is essential. (15)

People frequently confuse the "means" with the "end." The raw, undeveloped mind also imagines that the means that it adopts to do something is the best and only way:

A characteristic disease of human thought is to mistake the vehicle and the objective, or the instrument and the aim. This tendency is seen in all human communities, whether they are what we call 'advanced' or otherwise. It is as strongly present in civilized as in barbaric societies, only its manifestations are different. The rule is that: something which was functional becomes prized for itself; whether it is an exercise becoming a ritual, or an individual worker becoming idolized, or a tool becoming a totem . . . The means and the end are not the same. The tool becoming a totem is especially marked as a tendency when people want to generalize theories, laws and rules out of situations which require a greater flexibility than just one or two alternatives. (16)

Those who advocate the "power of positive thinking" to overcome unhealthy psychological patterns, fail to realize that this approach only touches the surface and not the depth and ultimate cause of the problem:

Q: Is there any value in trying to think positively?

A: Positive thinking belongs to psychological survival. It is the affirmation of the ego. Psychological technique reinforces experience and the experiencer. But as long as you still live in the mind, in complementarity, then positive thinking is closer to your real nature than negative thinking. However, all such methods are crutches to help you walk in apparent security. They are supports for the immature. When you live in wholeness, you have no need for such supports. It is like the tight-rope walker who has found perfect balance without aid. If someone comes to the right or left and offers help he is no longer at ease because his balance does not refer to left or right. (17)

Subjective Opinion and Belief

We tend to evaluate life experiences by our own subjective yardstick. “To each thing you observe you bring your knowledge, your education, your past, your customs and your heredity. This is why we can all look at the same things but see them in different ways.” There are many different ways of viewing reality, none superior to any other:

Actions and states are according to one’s point of view. A crow, an elephant, a snake, each makes use of one organ for two alternative purposes. With one eye the crow looks on either side; for the elephant the trunk serves the purpose of both a hand and a nose; and the serpent sees as well as hears with its eyes. Whether you say the crow has an eye or eyes, or refer to the trunk of the elephant as “hand” or “nose,” or call the eyes of the serpent its ears, it means all the same. (18)

Many of our thoughts are based on personal memories (“me and my story”) or collective identifications such as race, nationality, social class, religious affiliation or political allegiance:

Most people are so completely identified with the voice in their head – the incessant stream of involuntary and compulsive thinking and the emotions that accompany it – that we may describe them as being possessed by their mind. As long as you are completely unaware of this, you take the thinker to be what you are. This is the egoic mind. We call it egoic because there is a sense of self, of I (ego), in every thought – every memory, every interpretation, opinion, viewpoint, reaction, emotion. This is unconsciousness, spiritually speaking. Your thinking, the content of your mind, is of course conditioned by the past: your upbringing, culture, family background, and so on. The central core of all your mind activity consists of certain repetitive and persistent thoughts, emotions and reactive patterns that you identify with most strongly. (19)

Subjectivity and lack of impartiality are a significant human problem and a major theme of esoteric teachings. “To reach an impartial viewpoint, you have to be able to look at situations beyond their immediate ‘message,’ so that you can eventually see things ‘in the round’.” Most human beings are easily swayed by subjective impressions and conditioned judgments. In the words of the Sufi teacher Hakim Sanai: *‘In the distorted mirror of your mind, an angel can seem to have a devil’s face.’*

Q: How do we reach impartiality?

A: Most people’s impartiality is not such at all, but a cover for a partial point of view. If you have a bias towards impartiality, your goal must be the control of bias, not the struggle towards impartiality – because you will never reach impartiality through bias. People who believe that they are impartial, however, seldom are . . . Lack of experience and information causes lack of impartiality; but this does not

stop people from believing that they are in fact objective. They believe this because they have a strong desire to be or appear to be impartial. (20)

A classic Mulla Nasrudin story humorously illustrates how our mental and emotional states may not be based on actual facts:

Mulla was crossing the street in his village when a man approached him saying, 'Do you know that your wife is being unfaithful to you?' Mulla quickly replied, 'That's impossible. My wife would never be unfaithful to me.' The man then answered, 'I can prove it to you. At midnight tonight she has a rendezvous with her lover under the fig tree at the edge of the village.' Mulla was very upset and, anticipating a duel with his wife's lover, went to buy a pistol. All day he practised and thought about the fight and at eleven in the evening he went to the fig tree in a terrific state of mind. He climbed into the tree and, being a very passionate man, leapt from branch to branch in a frenzy of jealousy and anger. He pictured his wife in her lover's arms and practised from every angle the blow he would deliver his rival. At ten minutes to twelve he listened carefully but could not yet hear anything. At five to twelve he was in a state of unbearable agitation and expectation. At three minutes to twelve there was still no sound of them and every nerve in his body was on edge. At twelve o'clock he was as unmoving as a tiger about to pounce on its prey. But still nothing happened under the tree. Then he was suddenly struck in all his being by a tremendous insight: 'I am a bachelor!' (21)

One of the diseases of human thinking is the habit of confusing opinion and belief with actual knowledge and true understanding. "When a belief becomes more than an instrument you are lost." Beliefs and opinions are relative and time-bound. "The history of thought proves that each new structure raised by a person of extraordinary intellect is sure to be pulled down by the succeeding ones."

You cannot really believe in anything until you are aware of the process by which you arrived at your position. Before you do this you must be ready to postulate that all your beliefs may be wrong, that what you think to be belief may only be a variety of prejudices caused by your surroundings . . . True belief belongs to the realm of real knowledge. Until you have knowledge, belief is mere coalesced opinions, however it may seem to you. (22)

In the absence of information and experience, people can easily form opinions or draw conclusions at variance with the facts. "Most opinion is used as a substitute for knowledge. If opinion is over-strong, being cruder than knowledge, it blocks the action of knowledge." And changes of opinion are not always based on logical or rational reasons. Research has shown that "while people can reach a decision from facts given to them, they have great difficulty in altering these conclusions even when better evidence is presented to them."

The stock of information and knowledge belonging to the average person is often selective and incomplete, forming only an approximation to real knowledge. “People tend to assess unfamiliar things in terms of parts of their own experience which they imagine must be relevant to the case.”

What people think that they know (even thinking that they know it by observation and even experience) about other things, such as psychological and religious matters, can often be seen to be fragmentary, misplaced, selectively adopted. If people could rely upon themselves to learn by themselves, they would not need teaching. They wouldn’t even need scientific verification of fact to correct them, because their beliefs would be based on accurate information, since they would either observe correctly from the beginning or else reject inaccurate information. (23)

Strongly held beliefs and opinions create incalculable problems for both those who hold them and others who are affected by them:

Q: Would you give some examples of unwholesome thoughts?

A: Notions of good and evil, daydreams, “I love this, I hate that,” angry or resentful thoughts, stubborn opinions, needless judgments, unnecessary evaluations and conclusions, pointless discriminations, covetous and jealous thoughts.

Q: How is it possible to avoid making judgments and having opinions?

A: Note the word “needless.” Teachers, parents, critics, judges must make judgments – that’s their job. But we are speaking of *gratuitous* evaluations that the ordinary person makes dozens of times a day and that parents unwittingly compel their children to make.

Q: I still don’t see what is basically wrong with judgments and opinions.

A: Once you form an opinion you’re stuck with it. You then feel compelled to defend it, becoming argumentative and aggressive. “Opinion,” said Voltaire, “has caused more trouble on this earth than all the plagues and earthquakes. (24)

Individual and collective beliefs about what is “true” or “good” are usually relative in nature and culturally determined. For instance, people who are considered “idealists” may in actual fact be self-deluded and incapable of altering their beliefs and opinions in the face of objective data. “Idealists who lack necessary basic information about their field are extremely harmful to the human race.”

When people, groups and organizations make decisions or take action based on partial information or “moral principles” the results are often the opposite of what was intended.

Traditional spiritual teachings constantly stress the relativity of our opinions regarding good and bad, right and wrong. “Standards of good and bad depend upon individual or group criteria, not upon objective fact.”

If there is no knowledge, only information, people will act in accordance with that range of information available to them – at the best. At the worst, and more frequently, they will act in accordance with impulse or emotion linked with intellect and set off by what you call objective moral principles . . . If you look at the people deeply concerned about right and the right thing to do, you will note that their dominating characteristics are that they are worriers. They worry about nuclear bombs, about injustices, and so on. They make decisions as a result of worrying. Naturally they get a lop-sided result. They have no real feel of what is to happen as a result of certain actions, so they act on the spur of the moment. Naturally the consequences of their actions produce further worry-causing developments. They do not stop to think that recognition of an evil is one thing; worrying oneself to a point of action about it is another. (25)

In order to undermine fixed ideas, opinions and beliefs, spiritual teachers sometimes apply ‘shock’ techniques by challenging established ways of thinking and confronting the most dearly-loved assumptions of the student, thus liberating ‘congealed attention’ which has been frozen by subjective patterns of thought. “Ideologies, beliefs, opinions and points of view are the shadows which obscure the light of truth.” Although there is nothing wrong with conceptualization *per se*, when we take our opinions as absolute truth and fail to see that they are *opinions* then they become a hindrance to the realization of our true self or essential nature.

All words, all beliefs, belong to relative truth. All the things that you have read and studied and pondered may be true from a particular point of view at a certain time, but no more than that. Everything changes. Nothing lasts forever – not even these things that we may think are so true. A dogmatic attitude about these matters, about one’s beliefs and opinions, is against the true nature of things. (26)

Resistance to New Knowledge and Ideas

Most individuals do not know how or where to look for genuine knowledge. In many cases they reject new knowledge because its source or form is contrary to their expectations. In the words of Rumi: *‘Take the wheat, not the measure in which it is contained.’* Humanity in general does not appreciate the vast heritage of knowledge and wisdom, residing across cultures and time, available to it:

It is possible to have great affection and regard for individuals and groups of people without in any way reducing one’s awareness of their current poor capacity for understanding and preserving their heritage. The present state of ignorance

about distant and former cultures is not unique at this time. Unfortunately, though, the people of our time are not employing their superior resources to retrieve and develop the remnants of wider knowledge possessed elsewhere and also at other times. This is because, while the tools and the general freedom are there for the first time, desire, resolution and breadth of vision are absent, also for the first time. The endowment is therefore at risk. For the first time. (27)

People from many different cultures have an ideological bias against really new forms of thought, study and understanding, relating “everything which is being put forward in terms of a dogma which is already held in their minds.” Conditioning and indoctrination have been identified as major factors preventing the free dissemination of ideas. “Much knowledge is ignored, discarded or opposed because it is not apparently from an expected source, projected in a desired manner or presented in a comfortable way.”

By limiting themselves to certain pre-determined categories when approaching the introduction of new knowledge, people are unable to assimilate any real new learning. They relate any new ideas to old, established forms of thinking:

I found that the chief difficulty for most people was to realize that they had really heard *new things*; that is, things that they had never heard before. They did not formulate it for themselves, but in fact they always tried to contradict this in their minds and translate what they heard into their habitual language. I know that it is not an easy thing to realize that one is hearing *new things*. We are so accustomed to the old tunes, and the old motives, that long ago we ceased to hope and ceased to believe that there might be anything new. And when we hear new things, we take them for old, or think that they can be explained and interpreted by the old. It is true that it is a difficult task to realize the possibility and necessity of quite new ideas, and it needs with time a revaluation of all usual values. (28)

A common human characteristic is the attempt to safeguard existing ways of thinking by excluding and distorting new information or ideas originating from an unfamiliar source. “If any new idea is given out, some will seize it for profit, others to make a social form out of it, some will deify it and others will fight or amend it.” The problem of adapting to new knowledge is largely psychological, involving ‘defense mechanisms’ and ‘denial.’ When people come up against things which they cannot immediately understand they tend to produce pat answers and defensive reactions:

Those who cannot or will not adapt to constructive but unfamiliar information are members of the segment of humanity which does, in a cultural sense, die out. Those individuals, schools of thought and societies which have *not* adapted to ‘now’ (that is, unfamiliar) information and environmental change *have* died out. But there is a mechanical trap here, and it is worth observing in passing. People who oppose ‘now’ or unfamiliar concepts can be made to accept them if the ‘new’

conception is sufficiently energetically projected. That is to say, there would be no real difficulty in conditioning, by fear, hope and repetition, these objectors to 'believe' that fear, hope and repetition were undesirable in quantity or quality. The trap is that you would now have plenty of conditioned people who objected to conditioning because they had been conditioned to object! They would be useless to further understanding, almost by definition, certainly by the crudity of their operational capacity. (29)

Most people who believe that they are pursuing the path of learning and knowledge are in reality engaged in lesser pursuits disguised as learning. "Only a very small number are actually trying to learn. The rest are using the same words, but they are in fact demanding certain satisfactions from the enterprise: social, personal and community diversions being among the most obvious." The two main reactions to new knowledge or ideas are uncritical acceptance or hostility and rejection. Both attitudes interfere with learning growth and understanding. "People are first hostile to what they imagine is 'new.' Next they adjust to a state of support for the 'new,' which now becomes the 'received, attested' doctrine or practice."

The discovery and application of knowledge is not always a linear and accumulative process as is generally assumed by most scholars and thinkers:

Euclid, who lived about 300 BC, produced a proof in geometry that the two angles at the base of an isosceles triangle were equal to one another which became the standard proof. There is another demonstration, however, which is more elegant, and this was made known by Pappus about six hundred years later. The new proof was more elegant, but it did not only not catch on, it was soon forgotten. Time passed, and there is no record that anyone discovered this proof – in other words the knowledge was lost – until 1960. And, even then, the proof was not discovered by a human, but by a computer. Can you imagine how many people studied geometry, some of them really brilliant people, some of them innovators, between 300 and 1960? We live in a world where, without examining it, we assume that everything that was known in the past is still known today; where we think of knowledge as an accumulative process, as scientists believe it to be, where each part will help each other part, until, I suppose, at some time all knowledge will come together and we will know everything. This can happen however, only if we register the knowledge and then use it. In order to do that, we need to make a deliberate effort. (30)

It is important to recognize that there are many successive levels of knowledge and stages of study, each one superseding the previous. In order to transmit higher knowledge and esoteric teachings to contemporary cultures a certain amount of preliminary groundwork and intelligent preparation must be undertaken. "There are time-honoured ways of introducing into a society something which it needs but does not want to accept."

The limitations of this process, however, means that only those things can be projected and carried through which afford acceptable stimuli to a certain range of people at a given time. Let us postulate a community which needed, say, a certain medicine or piece of information or knowledge of a skill. Before any of these could be effectively introduced and maintained, it would be necessary for the factor, object, teaching or whatever it was to be presented in an acceptable way, by someone who was liked and perhaps respected, and also in such a way as to afford the kind of stimuli expected by the audience, readership, community and so on. (31)

Conceptualization Prevents Direct Perception of Reality

Our education, training and conditioning emphasize the differences between things, people and events, while ignoring the underlying unity behind appearances. The limitations of our category systems and conceptions define the boundaries of our conscious understanding of reality and prevent the perception of life as a whole. “The mind does not grasp the whole – its focus is very narrow. It sees fragments only and fails to perceive the larger picture.”

Most people are only able to perceive fragments of total reality because their minds are fixed in patterns designed to see things piecemeal. External observers examine and study human activity from only one limited perspective and scale of measurement. The inability of most people to entertain different points of view means that they lose a great deal of the meaning of life. “When we live in memory we cut ourselves off from the universe, we live in isolation. This is the root of all suffering.”

We typically assign words, names and concepts to specific phenomena, thereby falling into the common mistake of believing that knowledge of the object is knowledge of the whole. “The mind regards its self-constructed concepts as laws externally imposed on reality, which has to obey them in order to unfold itself. This attitude or assumption on the part of the intellect helps the mind to handle nature for its own purposes, but the mind altogether misses the inner workings of life.”

When Linnaeus drew up his botanical classification, he discussed it with Goethe who remarked: “You have all the elements (objects) in your hand, unfortunately the spirit which is the link between everything is missing.” What Goethe calls the “spirit,” is the reality which underlies name and form, which our usual scientific knowledge completely disregards. True knowledge, instead of endeavouring to seize names and forms by defining them as clearly as possible, eliminates and dissolves them. This negative process, apparently nihilistic, leads not to a grasping of reality, but to its revelation as a total unity. (32)

So-called logical or rational thinking divides reality into parts divorced from the whole and creating the illusion of a separate 'self.' In the words of spiritual teacher Toni Packer: "In the midst of this vast, unfathomable, ever-changing, dying, and renewing flow of life, the human brain is ceaselessly engaged in trying to fix for itself a state of permanency and certainty. Having the capacity to think and form pictures of ourselves, to remember them and become deeply attached to them, we take this world of pictures and ideas for real."

What we generally call 'thinking' is a process of memory. It is a projection built on the already known. All that exists, all that is perceived, is represented to the mind. Sequential thinking, rational or scientific thinking, thus begins with a fraction, a representation. Such fractional thinking is born from the conditioned idea that we are independent entities, 'selves,' 'persons.' The notion of being a somebody conditions all other thinking because the person can only exist in the repetition of representation, the confirmation of the already known . . . Memory is the originator of the idea of being a continuous entity. From the ultimate view thinking is a defense against the death of the ego. Who are you when you don't think? (33)

There is often a hidden psychological motive underlying the use of rational and scientific thinking which masks a deeper form and level of understanding. "When there is no psychological involvement, it is an expression of silence in time and space. The background of rational thinking is that non-representational presence we can call silent contemplation."

Rational thinking is a vehicle for maintaining our biological existence in daily life. It moves in the already known, what has been agreed on as an individual or collective convention. It is functional memory for organizing energy into useful patterns of thought. Rational, logical or scientific thinking starts from the known, thought derives from thought . . . However, the function of rational thinking is only a fraction of life. It should not be allowed to obscure the depths of our being. Unfortunately, like all our functions, rational thinking more often than not loses its purity and becomes directed by intention. Most so-called rational or technological thinking today is calculative. In calculative thinking it is the desire of the individual to achieve a result. Intentional thinking is based on accumulation of definition and conclusion, the past, the already known. Unhappily for the world, almost all scientific and supposedly artistic thinking today is calculative, the urge to achieve. There is a psychological goal hidden in the functional aim. Thought here is divorced from its home ground and identified with the person, the controller, the centre of reference. All desire to achieve is still within the self-centred field which binds us to a result. It is very difficult for people to understand that perfect functioning only emerges in the complete absence of end-gaining. (34)

There is a fundamental difference between perceiving something with the senses and thinking about it. "Whenever you bring your attention to anything natural, anything that has come into existence without human intervention, you step out of the prison of conceptualized

thinking and, to some extent, participate in the state of connectedness with Being in which everything natural still exists.”

When you perceive nature only through the mind, through thinking, you cannot sense its aliveness, its beingness. You see the form only and are unaware of the life within the form – the sacred mystery. Thought reduces nature to a commodity to be used in the pursuit of profit or knowledge or some other utilitarian purpose. The ancient forest becomes timber, the bird a research project, the mountain something to be mined or conquered. When you perceive nature, let there be spaces of no thought, no mind. When you approach nature in this way, it will respond to you and participate in the evolution of human and planetary consciousness. (35)

Each individual and culture develops their own subjective pattern of analysis, comparison, interpretation, evaluation, judgement and so on which are imposed on sense perceptions, preventing these impressions from being able to unfold fully in our consciousness. “When naming is weighed down by points of view it loses its true symbolic value as a window from silence to silence. Mistaking psychological representation for perception is a symptom of illusion and maintains the attitude of separate observer and observed.”

You see a rose. The intellect perceives and names it. Perfect functioning. But then it goes on and begins to interfere with the perception preventing it from unfolding in direct perception. The imaginary person, the centre of viewpoints, sees the colour and compares it, or likes it, or dislikes it perhaps. It thinks about its beauty or remembers some past reference. But during this activity where is the real perfume of the rose? Psychological activity is fractional and successive. There can be only one percept or concept at a time, so it is impossible to feel the wholeness of the rose with the everyday functioning of the mind. You can only add up its parts. But the true perfume of the rose, what it really is, is not in a collection of fractions. When you step back from stressing the parts, when the mind becomes still, the rose comes to you, unfolds in you in all her glory. The perfume invades you completely. The rose is you. You are one. (36)

Because of the powerful influence of education and culture, when we see an object we name it and immediately refer it to something already known. But in pure perception there is no memory or mental intervention and interpretation. Direct immediate perception is closer to truth than a concept. “If I could remain present to a flower and not refer to the past, to memory, the flower would appear as much more than I have stored in my memory. It would surpass all expectation, appearing in its fullness before my innocent eye.”

A perception is the first message given by the senses before the brain names it or the psychological mind qualifies it. The perception is always in the present, immediate, but conceptualization is memory. Most of the time we feel and function through memory. In everyday life we rarely give sensations time to make

themselves felt. We prematurely intervene, conceptualizing and qualifying them. Perceptions and concepts cannot exist simultaneously and we tend to cut the perception short before it has fully flourished. (37)

Transcending the World of Thought

The mind of the ordinary person has been described as “a checkerboard of criss-crossing reflections, opinions, prejudices, fears and anxieties.” These self-imposed limitations create a life that, far from being centered in reality, is grounded instead in *notions and concepts* of reality. The mystery of existence cannot be understood simply through conceptual thinking. “In the deepest sense, we understand nothing. What can be known by philosophers and scientists through reasoning is only a fraction of the universe. Can any philosopher or scientist really say why flowers bloom or why spring follows winter?”

When we use the mind and senses *functionally* there is a re-orchestration of consciousness which points to our deeper Self. “Remember that the mind is only a vehicle. When we don’t need our legs we don’t use them. Likewise let the mind rest when not needed.”

When you live in your globality, all the senses function without grasping, in expansion. They welcome surroundings. The brain is also a sense organ, and when it is relaxed it simply recognizes the object and welcomes the information from the senses. But our body and mind are rarely in this relaxed, receptive state. The senses are contracted and grasp. The brain qualifies, judges, compares, thinks about, and analyzes the object. Stay with the pure perception before the mind comes in. (38)

When human beings are “lost in thought” they are unable to perceive the greater Reality from which thought arises and passes into consciousness. “The next step in human evolution is to transcend thought. It doesn’t mean not to think anymore, but simply not to be completely identified with thought, possessed by thought.”

Most people spend their entire life imprisoned within the confines of their own thoughts. They never go beyond a narrow, mind-made personalized sense of self that is conditioned by the past. In you, as in each human being, there is a dimension of consciousness far deeper than thought. It is the very essence of who you are. We may call it presence, awareness, the unconditioned consciousness . . . Love, joy, creative expansion, and lasting inner peace cannot come into your life except through that unconditioned dimension of consciousness. If you can recognize, even occasionally, the thoughts that go through your mind as simply thoughts, if you can witness your own mental-emotional reactive patterns as they happen, then that dimension is already emerging in you as the awareness in which thoughts and emotions happen – the timeless inner space in which the content of your life unfolds. (39)

Relative knowledge pertains to the mind and is therefore illusory and not permanent. To completely understand anything it must be experienced in dimensions beyond the functioning of the normal discriminating intellect. Real knowledge is direct experience of the Self. "Mind is consciousness which has put on limitations. You are originally unlimited and perfect."

The mind depends on a Higher Power or Source to function. "Just as one who wants to throw away garbage has no need to analyze it and see what it is, so one who wants to know the Self has no need to count the number of categories or inquire into their characteristics: what one has to do is to reject altogether the categories that hide the Self."

The intellect shines only by the light it derives from the Self. Is it not presumptuous on the part of the intellect to sit in judgment over that of which it is but a limited manifestation, and from which it derives its little light? How can the intellect, which can never reach the Self, be competent to ascertain, much less decide, the nature of the final state of Realization? It is like trying to measure the sunlight at its source by the standard of the light given by a candle. The wax will melt down before the candle comes anywhere near the sun. Instead of indulging in mere speculation, devote yourself here and now to the search for the Truth that is ever within you. (40)

The mind by nature is restless and constantly changing, but the Self is peace itself, without beginning and end, "all-pervading, all-powerful, immovable prime mover, timelessly changeless." The mind can never change the mind: real change is not a mental process. "Only silent awareness, being out of time, can bring about true transformation."

The true knowledge of the Self is not a knowledge. It is not something that you find by searching, by looking everywhere. It is not to be found in space or time. Knowledge is but a memory, a pattern of thought, a mental habit. All these are motivated by pleasure and pain . . . Being oneself is completely beyond all motivation. You cannot be yourself for some reason. You *are* yourself, and no reason is needed. (41)

There are successive levels of spiritual knowledge which orient humanity in the direction of evolutionary growth. Higher understanding requires a certain way of perceiving the world beyond logic and the intellectual extension of observed fact. Certain aspects of life, especially deep experiences, can only be perceived by an inner sense and not just understood intellectually or by words:

When there is complete understanding, there is silence. There is no talk. If you share an experience with someone, and this is a true and real experience, can you put it into words? Do you want to put it into words? When you are in love, does 'I love you' mean anything? Or is it the touch of a hand, the exchange of a glance, which means real love? Something very important is happening in your mind when you have an experience. You take the experience in, and your mind labels

it. To do this it has to split it up into a vast number of tiny impressions. Your mind may not be ready for the whole experience, so that the mind cannot handle the impressions. It will select some, and then transmit back to another part of your brain an assessment. This assessment is what intellectuals use. They deal in incomplete assessments. This is why some agree, some differ. In real experience there is no possibility of disagreement. (42)

When the power of thought and mental associations are properly understood the possibility of higher consciousness and perception emerges. "Within mankind is a 'treasure' which is inside a house (fixed thinking patterns) which has to be broken down before it can be found."

My thought has the power to be free. But for this to take place, it must rid itself of all the associations which hold it captive, passive. It must cut the threads which bind it to the world of images, to the world of forms; it must free itself from the constant pull of the emotions. It must *feel* its power to resist this pull; its objective power to watch over this pull while gradually rising above it. In this movement thought becomes active. It becomes active while purifying itself. Thereby its true aim is revealed, a unique aim: to think *I*, to realize *who I am*, to enter into this mystery. Otherwise our thoughts are just illusions, objects which enslave us, snares in which real thought loses its power of objectivity and intentional action. Confused by words, images, forms that attract it, it loses the capacity to see. It loses the sense of *I*. Then nothing remains but an organism adrift. A body deprived of intelligence. Without this inner look, I can only back into automatism, under the law of accident. So my struggle is a struggle against the passivity of my ordinary thought. Without this struggle a greater consciousness will not be born. Through this struggle I can leave behind the illusion of "I" in which I live and approach a more real vision . . . It is in my essence that I may be reunited with the one who sees. There, I would be at the source of something unique and stable, at the source of that which does not change." (43)

Beyond the ordinary reactive mind there lies a deeper level of consciousness which is receptive to higher influences emanating from the source of life itself. "True knowledge is beyond concept, prior to concept. The wordless, speechless state is real knowledge."

A puppet can only react to the stimuli imparted by the puppeteer, but sentient beings have the capacity to not only react to the stimuli, which is what happens generally, but also to act independently of any outside stimulus. The kind of receptivity to which I refer is obtained when there is not only no reacting to stimuli, but an openness to consciousness without the intrusion of personal proclivities and set views; in short, without the intrusion of individuality. (44)

Creativity often emerges from a state of inner quiet and stillness, following which the mind gives form and expression to the creative impulse or insight:

Thinking and consciousness are not synonymous. Thinking is only a small aspect of consciousness. Thought cannot exist without consciousness, but consciousness does not need thought. Enlightenment means rising above thought, not falling back to a level below thought, the level of an animal or a plant. In the enlightened state, you still use your thinking mind when needed, but in a much more focused and effective way than before. You use it mostly for practical purposes, but you are free from the involuntary internal dialogue, and there is inner stillness. When you do use your mind, and particularly when a creative solution is needed, you oscillate every few minutes or so between thought and stillness, between mind and no-mind. No-mind is consciousness without thought. Only in that way is it possible to think creatively, because only in that way does thought have any real power. Thought alone, when it is no longer connected with the much vaster realm of consciousness, quickly becomes barren, insane, destructive. (45)

When we are no longer bound by the power of the relative, conditioned mind we are open to the possibility of a fuller way of experiencing life. "A monk asked Chao-chou, 'How should I use the twenty-four hours?' Chao-chou said, 'You are used by the twenty-four hours. I use the twenty-four hours'." Openness to life experiences is a prerequisite to the cultivation of wisdom and understanding:

Uncultivated men often have wisdom to some degree because they allow the access of the impacts of life itself. When you walk down the street and look at things or people, these impressions are teaching you. If you *try* actively to learn from them, you learn certain things, but they are predetermined things. (46)

We harmonize with the flow of life when we set aside our conceptual minds and directly experience reality as it unfolds:

As nature abhors a vacuum, Zen abhors anything coming between the fact and ourselves. According to Zen there is no struggle in the fact itself such as between the finite and the infinite, between flesh and the spirit. These are idle distinctions fictitiously designed by the intellect for its own interest. Those who take them too seriously or those who try to read them into the very fact of life are those who take the finger for the moon. When we are hungry we eat; when we are sleepy we lay ourselves down; and where does the infinite or the finite come in here? Are we not complete in ourselves and each in himself? Life as it is lived suffices. (47)

Our ultimate nature transcends all ideas, representations and concepts. "The world you perceive is none other than a figment of the imagination founded on memory, fear, anxiety and desire. There is no need whatsoever for you to free yourself from a world which exists only in your imagination."

What you take to be reality is only a concept arising from memory. Memory arises from the mind, mind from the witness, the witness from the Self. You are the witness, the onlooker standing on the bank watching the river flow on. You do not move, you are changeless, beyond the limits of space and time. You cannot perceive what is permanent, because you are it. Do not nourish the ideas you have built around yourself nor the image people have of you. Be neither someone nor something, just remain free from the demands of society. Don't play its game. This will establish you in your autonomy. (48)

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