



Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way

Idries Shah, Doris Lessing (Introduction)

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In response to the many inquiries he has received about the Sufi tradition, leading Sufi expert Idries Shah presents a clarifying series of questions and answers that illustrates how traditional Sufi concepts can resolve our social, psychological, and spiritual problems. This is the ideal introduction to Sufi wisdom.

Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way Details

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Ita says

To say that this is an important book is a mega-understatement. As an individual, reading it with attention can benefit you more than you will ever know. But Shah also identified blind spots in our culture which have far reaching effects on our ability to solve the many problems which beset us.

One of these is disguised gratification-seeking – believing you are doing something useful when you are only entertaining yourself.

‘This is a most important technical problem. It can be solved certainly in the case of some people. But first it must be observed. No culture of today provides any generally applicable theoretical or practical method of drawing attention to it, let alone doing anything about it. And yet it remains one of the major stumbling blocks to human progress.’

Has anything changed since 1978?

Forty years ago Shah also drew attention to attention, devoting five pages of ‘Learning How to Learn’ to the ‘Characteristics of Attention and Observation’.

‘Study the attracting, extending and reception, as well as the interchange, of attention’ because, he wrote, ‘One of the keys to human behaviour is the attention-factor.’

To see how our attitude to attention has changed I recommend reading the blog on the Idries Shah Foundation website:

www.idriesshahfoundation.org

This, and the other blogs on the website, fine tune Shah's work to the present.

Julian Hadlow says

A book designed to help those like me who come at the ageless wisdom from a Western viewpoint to understand that we in the West are missing some vital steps in trying to understand certain concepts. It helps in putting back that missing info. I re-read this book recently, and again gained much from it.

Romanista says

There is only one book worse than this among those I tried reading - Warcraft but that's a YA book.

Let's start saying that the author thinks too highly of himself and of his "sufi brothergood". Calling your "brotherhood" "a great brotherhood" is a bit arrogant.

I'm not sure if I got it correctly but this guy says his fellow sufies are capable of doing miracles. Sounds like some sci-fi. I like sci-fi but when it's stated "sci-fi" not when I'm reading a serious book.

The books title has nothing to with the book itself. It contains lot's of "water", sci-fi, self-prising and 5-10% of the book is useful. So basically if you cut out all self-prising, "water" and sci-fi I would rate it as 2.5 stars. Now it's 1 start coz there is no 0 star.

Julie says

note: don't attempt to read this book while driving.

Oscar says

A jewel about the human psyche and the structure of study groups and organizations.

John Handforth says

There's an almost inexhaustible quality to this book, which Psychology Today described as a watershed in studies of the mind. Shah uses stories, jokes, Questions & Answers, and essays to delve into the psychology of learning. He illustrates many assumptions that can get in the way of learning and also that techniques useful in one kind of learning may be self-defeating if used in a different field.

One of the most interesting and insightful sections is on the giving and receiving of Attention. People need a certain amount of attention. Recognition of this need, and understanding when it is in play, can help people to be more efficient at getting what they need and perhaps waste less time engaging in arguments, gossip and the like.

There is a tremendous amount of information and insight in this book, and though it is written in a clear, coherent manner, it's hard to imagine anyone absorbing it all in a single read.

Ramsay Wood says

Why re-invent the wheel?

Started doing a review on this book when I remembered I had a tattered photocopy of an old one by Doris Lessing somewhere. "Why re-invent the wheel", I thought, and found it after scrabbling through messy files. Dated July 1982 from 'The Literary Review', I typed it up because it forthrightly said more than I could 36 years later. See what you think, and if you can do better — then have a go yourself. But I'll just pause here in historical re-cycle mode. Call me lazy if you must, but in fairness read the book first.

"SEEKER AFTER TRUTH has in it twelve traditional tales – 'teaching stories' – as beguiling as our familiar fairytales, and I believe until now unknown in the West...tales of Sufi ancients, chosen to illustrate problems of now as much as of then... exchanges from the supper table talk of a modern Sufi teacher and his pupils...difficulties of of contemporary Sufi teachings in the West.....samples from a letter bag that must be unique in our time, set out in question and answer form....anecdotes and narratives designed to show Sufi thought in action...results of current sociological and psychological research that throw light on defects in our thinking. This book, which describes itself as a handbook, is food for many different kinds of study – a book unlike anything our own society has produced until recently, in its richness, its unexpectedness, its capacity to shock us into seeing ourselves as others see us, both personally and as a society.

What can be the source of such a book, that so defies our conventions, putting together subjects that we agree

should be kept separate, like science and religion, entertainment and learning? Those who have already met the books of Idries Shah will know the answer. Few who fairly and openmindedly examine his books fail to find nutrition and interest in them, and all kinds of people eagerly look out for the arrival of a new one, not only the students who try to learn the Sufi way with Shah for whom they are part of the 'curriculum.' This ideas that twenty years ago, appeared for the first time in Shah's early books have become commonplace and can be seem at work everywhere. Particularly in the realm of the sciences has this way of thinking been found useful. Sociology, anthropology, psychology – these owe, and acknowledge, a debt to the Sufi bequest, which is thousands of years worth of skilled expertise in the art of human development.

I have to declare my bias: while it is a mistake, leading to onesideness, to put emphasis on one area at the cost of others, I am particularly fascinated by how these ancient ideas translate into modern terms, into what Shah describes as 'the infant soft sciences.' It is now a psychological commonplace, though of recent origin to say that we can see only what we are conditioned to see: the Sufis have said for millenia that their problem is always that a new introduction of Sufism has to find ways of crossing the barriers of the assumptions of a particular culture.

It is precisely because of the unreliability of vision, of memory, of wanting to believe, of induced belief... that the Sufis say that an objective perception must be acquired before even familiar things can be seem as they are.

We are invited, over and over again, from a hundred different angles, to acknowledge our animal legacy, so that we control our behaviour instead of being controlled by instincts that we sometimes do not acknowledge. Very abrasive some of these insights are. For instance, our social habits are seen by us in flattering terms, but rats behave as we do.

".....when rats are offered alcohol, recreation, food, in circumstances to those afforded man, they tend to adopt similar forms of behaviour....humans say that they drink alcohol to reduce tension, to be sociable, to do business with their fellow drinkers, to avoid loneliness and so on. Can it be the same with rats? The explanation seems to be that some social behaviour, at least, is rooted in the animal level of behaviour."

We live in a society where emotionalism is prized; to say that something has moved us, is the equivalent of saying that it is good, worthy, admirable.. But the Sufis say that many of the 'higher' feelings we prize are merely crude emotionalism; and 'It is characteristic of the primitive to regard things which are felt strongly to be of importance..' And, again, 'the importance of something is in inverse proportion to its attractiveness.' (Students of traditional mysticism will find an echo here.)

'Secrets' are casually offered. For instance to the question: 'By what method do the Sufis extract information of value to present day psychology and higher knowledge from ancient written materials?', Shah replies in terms of recent scientific research in Syria, explaining how a biblical anecdote about a miracle done by Elisha can be seen as simple ion exchange. He added salt to water that had zeolite in it, thus making a spoiled spring healthy again.

A genuine Sufi path has to be expressed within the terms and modes of a contemporary society, using its language. A new Sufi Exemplar will make sure that traditional Sufi literature is available while introducing new material created for the new time."

Toni says

Learning how to Learn.

Question: ' What can you do about imitators...et al..?

'That reminds me of a joke. It is said that a small boy was faced with an examination question: What is rabies and what can you do about it? He wrote as his answer: 'Rabies is Jewish priests and there is nothing you can do about it!'

'.....I am however interested in the inherent assumption: the one behind the question- that one should do anything about it or that one could indeed do anything about it.....'

As quoted in the book- a quote from Rumi- False gold exists because there is such a thing as real gold.

This book is real gold. It's a guard and a protection. Helps one, if one can concentrate for a second without one's mind wobbling all over the place to arrange one's thoughts, to think clearly. Idries Shah's book are the materials from which evolutions are made: pearls by any other name.

A'isha Rahman says

I think this was an excellent book.

It is not what I expected with the Q&A format.

But alhumdulilah it answered many questions I have had and some I never thought about.

Kevan Bowkett says

This book is replete with lessons on how to orient one's mind so that one can learn. A number of the lessons seem to have to do with discrimination, as expressed in this couplet (p. 208, Octagon hardcover edition):

Put your dough into the oven when it is hot:

After making sure that it is in fact dough.

Eric Pulaski says

Fantastic book. A must-read. :-)

Alex says

As with all of Shah's works one reading will not be enough. He did talk much of the conditioned mind, and I feel that Krishnamurti is a better speaker on the subject, yet I understand that there are forms of conditioning that are not apparent, and will reveal inner meaning to Sufi stories and ideas. The basic stages of

development in Sufis and in other esoteric spiritual paths are similar, but it seems that not all of them share the same states, but perhaps similar stages. The Sufi will develop in a different way and with different perceptions than say a Buddhist practitioner.

He talks much of who is suitable for the path and who is not. He also speaks of the importance of not having a wanton grouping of students, but rather a group that is selected on the basis of aspiration, development, and potentiality. I think this is rather important, as only when these conditions are met, will we be able in my opinion to do real work for the benefit of others.

An interesting thing to note is that following the instructions of your teacher is of the utmost importance as demonstrated in this book.

I would recommend this book to Sufis, but no one who is not engaging with Sufism. However Shah does point out the need for people uninterested in mysticism to have practice with Sufis, however how this could come to be I am unsure.

Movsar Bekaev says

Amazing work on personal development which will open your third and fourth eyes!

Kelsey says

Good one to own and keep on the shelf - needs more than a once over.

Dustin J Allen says

Really cool way to experience Sufi wisdom. Enriching, beautiful, funny, meaningful stories.
