



The Commanding Self

Idries Shah

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The commanding self in Sufi terminology is that mixture of primitive and conditioned responses, common to everyone, which inhibits and distorts human progress and understanding. The book serves to illustrate and amplify Idries Shah's preceding (over 20) books on the Sufi Way.

The Commanding Self Details

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From Reader Review The Commanding Self for online ebook

Kevan Bowkett says

This book by Afghan author Idries Shah addresses barriers to learning and effective action -- barriers often called 'the Commanding Self' by the Middle Eastern and Central Asian sages known as the Sufis. The volume treats of this complex of 'primitive and conditioned responses' and its effects from many angles. The content is correspondingly rich and varied -- including tales, jokes, historical anecdotes, question-and-answer, and short essays or commentaries. The text exhibits the very subtle and powerful psychology (and sociology) of the Sufis, and their manifold efforts to help free the ordinary mind from the mental warping of the Commanding Self. A vital, vigorous book.

DETAILS:

Published: London: The Octagon Press, 1994. A new edition is to be released soon by ISF Publishing.
xii [=12] + 332 pages, cloth and paperback

Written by Afghan author Idries Shah, notable traveler, collector of stories, and commentator upon the Sufis.

A review can only give a faint suggestion of this book: best to find a copy and 'taste' it yourself.

The book, using a variety of approaches, gives insight into the 'commanding self,' how it distorts understanding, and steps one can take to become less subject to it (while allowing the expression of healthy psychological impulses). The Sufis assert that all of us are subject to such a cluster of 'primitive and conditioned' responses, which make us less free and self-directed than we like to think.

The book uses tales, anecdotes, expository passages, and question-and-answer to illustrate this process. For instance, there is 'Etiquette,' containing an account of how the queen of Spain, who'd slipped from her horse with her foot still caught in the stirrup, couldn't be rescued by any of the Court grandees present, as none had the authority to touch her. She was saved by a passer-by -- who was promptly exiled for his temerity in violating Court etiquette.

Then there is 'Levitation,' the story of the astronomer who announced on the BBC that Pluto was to produce an effect detectable on Earth -- at a certain time, if people jumped into the air, they should feel a floating sensation. Many reported jumping and experiencing the floating -- having been told on the morning of April Fool's Day that this would occur.

The power of suggestion seems to have exerted a formidable effect in this case (maybe alongside desires for attention, and for fitting in). This anecdote would seem also to show that to a great extent we have not yet attained to that level of 'sense' our culture claims is 'common.'

There is also the tale of 'The Valiant Trader-Knight,' a humorous story in which a man goes through several experiences without perceiving some of their essential elements -- as a result, he develops a completely wrong, inflated idea of his capacities.

(This seems a recurring theme in Sufi psychology: that we often miss essential elements in situations, elements that make the circumstances completely different from what we imagine. Courses of Sufi study, like the one of which this book is a part, seem to be designed to help the student to perceive these hidden 'ingredients' in situations.)

These are just a few examples that the book presents us of the Commanding Self at work. The volume is in

many ways a treasure-trove of how NOT to think and behave. And to some degree we are helped not to behave thus by the colour and vividness of the illustrations, which can help us remember them. So we have the tale in the section 'Spiritual Teachers,' which seems to contain a great deal that's essential. A captain allows three holy men aboard his ship as passengers, each possessed of a skill. The first can see an enormous distance, the second can hear things very far away. The third seems to have a less useful skill: he can 'point out irrelevances, so that relevancies might remain.' When the ship is at sea, the first holy man observes "'the daughter of the King of India, sewing at the window of her palace!'"

The second holy man shouted:

"And I [italized] can hear that she has just dropped her needle, and it has struck the ground below her!"

The third holy man, who had been standing by, looked at the Captain, who was beginning to feel greatly impressed by these miracles. The Captain caught his eye, and remembered that he stood for the observing of irrelevancies.

"I think," said the Captain to the third holy man, "that the time has come for me to become your [ital.] disciple, for I nearly failed to learn your lesson: which I need before I can benefit from information about the life of the Princess of India!"

There are numerous recommendations on how to orient toward learning and Sufi study, such as 'Intolerable Mishmash?' and 'Escape.' The importance of humour is underscored in 'Advisable.' There is also important material on the enneagon, ancient monuments, and planetary symbols -- but this material does not invite us into a spell of historical fascination; rather, these passages appear to be there to give us just enough information on these subjects to limit the undue growth of the Commanding Self.

Each tale, anecdote, or passage seems to include a good deal of teaching in a very small compass; and to draw attention to this or that passage in a review seems to distort or overemphasize it. (Again: read the book for the real flavour and content.)

Shah's book reveals a great deal of subtle and powerful psychology and anthropology -- for instance in the sections on 'Idealism,' on 'Loading and Unloading' (this section alone is more than worth the price of admission, given its potential for clearing up many misunderstandings in communication), on 'Displacement Activity,' on assumptions and attention-seeking (in the section 'Preconditions...'), on the barriers to higher perception illustrated in the funny and memorable 'Eight Analogies,' and on the importance of digesting what one is taught, not just tasting it, in the section 'Undigested.' Surely, by the way, this must be one of the functions of anthropology: to apply it to ourselves, so that we can see more clearly what motivates us, and how we might overcome pressures that limit us. Psychological processes that limit learning are addressed almost continuously in the text. Shah emphasizes that we are often subject to conditioned patterns (eg. 'scholasticism, or puzzle-solving, or a tendency to seek emotional satisfactions') when trying to learn or approach spirituality.

A wise man once said:

"In the next life, you will not be asked, 'Why did you not behave like such-and-such a person?'"

"You will be asked:

'Why did you not behave like your real self?'"

"If you know who and what you are, you can start to be that person, instead of a copy of the ideas, the behaviour or the image of someone else, or some collection of people. Then you can really be [ital.]."

In the section 'Conditioning,' the author highlights a vital approach toward learning:

It is only when the desire for knowledge and understanding becomes as effective as the craving for emotional stimulus that the individual becomes accessible to change, to knowledge, to more than a very little understanding.

So learning must be preceded by the capacity to learn. THAT, in turn, comes about at least in part by right attitude. And THAT, again, is where the would-be learner has to exercise effort.

Among the many gems well worth reflecting on is the following:

Sufis are not here to satisfy a demand. They exist to share what they have got. These two things are not always the same.

And the reader may wish to have a look at the cover. The image, just like the text inside, seems to bear reflection.

Early on, Shah has already helped us orient constructively toward the Commanding Self and its problems:

The answer? Time and service rather than wanting to take a place on the totem-pole. It is for this reason that Sufi teachers divert vanity from the spiritual area, by encouraging their disciples to channel the Commanding Self's activities to any worthy worldly ambition: while continuing to study the Sufi Way in a modest and non-self-promoting manner.

This very worthwhile book is scheduled to be reissued soon by ISF Publishing: <http://isf-publishing.org/>.

Hilary Bradley-Woodstock says

'The Commanding Self' was yet another breath of fresh air when I first read it some years ago. It helped put the pieces of the puzzle together. When I first read Shah's 'The Sufis' age 19, I am now 70, I felt I had found the answers to questions neither my dear parents nor the American culture, in which I had been brought up, could answer. It was not what my family and culture had told or taught me that was a waste of time, in fact, they and it had taught me a huge amount that was positive and valuable. No, it was more what they were NOT able to explain or teach me that was wanting because their knowledge was confused and was just not functioning as it should have been in the culture at that time. Shah's job, like thousands before him, was to supply people in the West and East in modern times across the world with knowledge which reflects the truth about the history of life and the continuum of life on earth and how best to understand it and come to terms with it. His books filled in the gaps and, for me, continue to do so.

Garry Thornton says

If you are serious about learning more about yourself, this book is for you. A word of warning it may show you what you do not wish to see.

Aubrey Davis says

Contemplate much less the 'I shall progress,' than the 'I' stand in 'my way'. Reflections: Idries Shah

Idries Shah's The Commanding Self helped me recognize that what I think is my "normal" everyday self is actually a mix of primitive & conditioned reactions which inhibit and distort my understanding. Shocking, fresh, often funny the book points to a middle way where this "beast" is allowed to exercise its useful

functions & meet its needs while keeping the door open for other capacities or selves to emerge and grow.

Curtis Schofield says

This book can be read over and over and over, and each of the stories can be read over and over and over.

P Robbins says

Important. Life changing. the real deal.

Carbis Tribe says

Idries Shah does a fantastic job of extrapolating Sufic thought and principles in this book. His style of parables and stories remind me of the "Wisdom Literature" of times past, with many unexpected results and lessons learned. I have found this book invaluable, and it will take pride of place on my bookshelf. A must for anybody with an interest in Sufism, carving their own spiritual path, or involved in individuation.

Carol M says

The Commanding Self is that function of oneself and one's world which prevents absorbing unencountered descriptions of man and living. As if one's eyes (or mind) is not one's own. Why miss out? is what I say. Entertain descriptions outside one's comfort zone by recognizing impediments to understanding. This fascinating, as always, book by Idries Shah allows me to learn about this central block to seeing all sorts of things in the every day. Stories, psychology, science and conversations lead one through this most interesting, entertaining and useful view of life. Who more enjoyable and informative to have in one's living room than Idries Shah. His thoughts surprise but don't confound the reader. This is no weighty tome, maybe weightless tome might give a better feel for the book. On the proverbial desert island, a book by Idries Shah would strengthen my spirit like the best friend.

Julian Hadlow says

The book explains how we, particularly in the West, are prevented from understanding a wider perspective by conditioned responses, engrained habits and pre-formed ideas. They can slow us down or even prevent reaching any form of higher consciousness. The author uses his own inimitable style coupled with stories to help unshackle the mind.

Sergei_kalinin says

