

SELF-OBSERVATION

*'The Study of the Way requires self-encounter
along the way. You have not met yourself yet.'*
Rumi

Importance of Self-Observation

Self-observation is the beginning of self-knowledge. The challenge is to experience each thought, feeling and sensation as fully as possible without the attention wandering, and without judgement or evaluation. "As my only interest is to see, I do not intervene and the real significance of these thoughts and feelings is revealed."

Self-study and self-observation precedes and prepares for self-knowledge. "It is necessary to begin from the beginning. A man must begin observing himself as though he did not know himself at all, as though he had never observed himself."

Knowledge of oneself is a very big, but a very vague and distant aim. Man in his present state is very far from self-knowledge. Therefore, strictly speaking, his aim cannot even be defined as self-knowledge. Self-study must be his big aim. It is quite enough if a man understands that he must study himself. It must be man's aim to begin to study himself, *to know himself*, in the right way. Self-study is the work or the way which leads to self-knowledge. But in order to study oneself one must first learn *how to study*, where to begin, what methods to use. A man must learn how to study himself, and he must study the methods of self-study. The chief method of self-study is self-observation. (1)

In many spiritual traditions, especially the Gurdjieff Work, self-observation is the foundation of the practical work of inner transformation and development. "For insight to develop into the working of our body, mind and emotions a spirit of observation and deep questioning must be kept in the forefront. We can collect and quiet the mind, but then we must observe, examine, see its ways and its laws."

From the beginning, students were expected to observe themselves for at least a few minutes several times every day as if they were scientists examining elements of an experiment. Only then could they learn what they were really like behind their often inaccurate idea of themselves. Self-observation is an effort to attend, moment by moment, to all that is going on in oneself and between oneself and the world, without judgment or opinion about it. Although we all have an inner judge ready to categorize and criticize everything and everyone we meet as well as our own thoughts and actions, as soon as that accusatory element enters, we are no longer engaged in a disinterested investigation. (2)

Self-observation is a skill which can be developed and cultivated. “We do not know how to observe. Our moments of perception are contaminated by our subjective reaction. We have lost the elegance of simple perception and spontaneous response.”

One has to learn to observe. If one cannot observe the movement of the mind, then what is going to take place beyond mind will not be observed. As one observes the clouds in the sky, the flowers in a garden, the ripples on the waters, the waves on the ocean, as one observes without wanting to do anything about them, so one can observe the movement of the mind in a relaxed way, without condemning, without accepting, without denying. First one observes it, sitting by oneself in solitude and if this state of observation can be sustained in solitude then one can be in the state of observation throughout the day. One goes to the office to work, listens to the words of the boss, sees the reaction coming up in oneself, of anger, of irritation, of annoyance. One sees the objective challenge and the subjective reaction coming up simultaneously. And this capacity to be aware of the objective challenge and the subjective reactions simultaneously results in an elevation of consciousness from the plane of challenge and reaction to a different plane altogether. (3)

The majority of human beings have little sense of who they truly are and rarely question their own subjective beliefs about themselves and their life. But with self-observation, mental, emotional and physical processes that are unconscious, existing in darkness, become illuminated by the light of consciousness. “So many sides of myself are a stranger to me. Only by being present, observing, and not identifying with the content of the observation are these hidden sides seen.”

We must surely acknowledge that in reality we do not know ourselves. What is more, the mistaken belief that we do know ourselves is the very obstacle that prevents us (since we think it pointless) from understanding the work which in fact we need the most. If we have some understanding of this situation, we begin to question ourselves about ourselves and we realize that we need to learn to turn ourselves towards ourselves and toward our inner life. We need to see ourselves as we are, instead of the picture we have of ourselves. To see ourselves better, we must first observe ourselves impartially – in complete sincerity, without changing anything – simply because we have this need to see ourselves as we are. That is why all work in this direction begins with self-observation – observation which is all-embracing, global and impartial. (4)

Directly observing our physical, emotional and mental functioning is the first stage of self-observation and must precede any attempts at analysis or interpretation:

There are two methods of self-observation: *analysis*, or attempts at analysis, that is, attempts to find the answers to the questions: upon what does a certain thing depend, and why does it happen; and the second method is registering, simply

'recording' in one's mind what is observed at the moment. Self-observation, especially in the beginning, must on no account become analysis or attempts at analysis. Analysis will only become possible much later when a man knows all the functions of his machine and all the laws which govern it . . . Before it is possible to analyze even the most elementary phenomena, a man must accumulate a sufficient quantity of material by means of *'recording.'* *'Recording,'* that is, the result of a direct observation of what is taking place at a given moment, is the most important material in the work of self-study. When a certain amount of *'records'* have been accumulated and when, at the same time, laws to a certain extent have been studied and understood, analysis becomes possible. (5)

Challenges and Difficulties

In actual practice, sustained self-observation is very challenging. "It is difficult from the beginning. If one is to do this, it can only be done here and now. One cannot observe oneself five minutes ago or five minutes from now – only here and now. This instant moment is the only time I can observe myself."

One has to divide oneself into two – the observer and the observed. This requires in the first place a degree of control over attention which is, to begin with, extraordinarily difficult. Not only is it difficult to set up, but it is impossible to maintain for more than a very short time. What one has to do is to make an inner movement that establishes a kind of silent witness that stands beside oneself and is aware of what is going on. This is difficult because it is unaccustomed, because it makes this unusual demand to divide the attention, and because we are not taught to do it in life. It does happen, but rarely. It happens sometimes as a result of a heightened intensity of emotion. These are certain emotional moments, the memory of which stands out vividly. (6)

Self-observation is not easy and requires a sustained effort to overcome our habitual inertia and resistance to change:

In order to observe, I have to struggle. My ordinary nature refuses self-observation. I need to prepare, to organize a struggle against the obstacle, to withdraw a little from my identification – speaking, imagining, expressing negative emotions. Conscious struggle requires choice and acceptance. It must not be my state that dictates the choice. I must choose the struggle to be present and accept that suffering will appear. There is no struggle without suffering. Struggle is unacceptable to our lower nature; struggle upsets it. That is why it is so important always to remember what we wish – the meaning of our work and our Presence. In going against a habit, for example, like eating or sitting in a certain way, we are not struggling to change the habit. Or in trying not to express negative emotions,

we are not struggling against the emotions themselves or struggling to do away with their expression. It is a struggle with our identification, to allow the energy otherwise wasted to serve the work. We struggle not *against* something, we struggle *for* something. (7)

The process of change and transformation through self-observation may be slow, requiring patience and fortitude:

Self-observation is an art and science of its own, one that can be increasingly mastered over a lifetime. Following the ceaseless ebbs and flows of one's mind is not as easy as it may sound. True self-observation actually requires consistently focused and regulated effort, in all kinds of situations, easy, difficult or in-between. The first thing you learn is how surprisingly hard it is to sustain, even for a moment. Lest you become discouraged too soon, however, remember that you seldom know when you are learning or absorbing knowledge and often aren't when you think you are. That is an immutable principle of real learning, as distinguished from indoctrination, conditioning and the like. Nonetheless, you will be able to notice small changes in yourself after a while, provided you do not seek them too strenuously. Uncritical acceptance of yourself *as is* is a precondition, and your improvements will subsequently manifest as gradual reductions in obsessive and compulsive tendencies, over-emotionalism, rationalization and negativism. (8)

Rightly conducted self-observation requires an attitude and approach similar to that of a scientist studying some natural phenomenon – objective, impartial and dispassionate. In scientific research data is first collected and then analyzed before drawing any definite conclusions. There is an analogous approach in the practice of self-observation: "Observation is concerned with how we act, what we do. Analysis is concerned with why we act as we do, with what we are – because what we are determines what we do."

In the Gurdjieff Work, self-observation is one of the cornerstones of practical self-study. Students are instructed to be honest, non-judgemental and not to try to change anything that is observed:

Our fundamental effort was to see ourselves as we were, trying to witness, to be "present" to, whatever was taking place at the moment. Using various methods handed down from Gurdjieff, we were to attempt to discover in ourselves an attention that could "record" whether what we were experiencing at the moment was a thought, a feeling, a sensation, or some combination of these or other functions. We were also to attempt to observe our identification with our various habits, including daydreaming, imagination, inner talking, and so on, and to verify our own lack of inner unity. In attempting to observe ourselves – which often required going against the momentum of our habits in order to see them more clearly – we were reminded to try not to judge or analyze what was seen. According to Gurdjieff,

judgment and analysis would simply draw us back into the vicious cycle of identification with the contents of our awareness – especially with our own inner reactions to what we saw – consuming what little free attention might be available for continuing observation. If judgment or analysis occurred, however, which it often did in spite of our best intentions, we were to simply include it in our observations. In short, the Gurdjieff Work asked us to be scientists in relation to ourselves, with our own being as the object of our observations. (9)

It is difficult to maintain the quality of attention necessary for self-observation. It is easy to unconsciously move from observing thoughts, emotions and sensations to reacting, judging or commenting on them. The moment when one reacts to what one observes there is no longer pure direct observation. “The transition from simply experiencing what is happening to talking about it and reacting to it takes place without one realizing that it has taken place. The attention goes from bare awareness into a running commentary without one noticing it.”

What happens, time and time again, is that for a moment one can stand aside and impersonally experience what’s happening, but very quickly and imperceptibly observation changes into comment, and comment into emotional reaction to what one has observed. And the moment the observation changes into comment, one has lost the pure impression. One just has to go on trying, and it is not an easy thing to do. But one is simply seeing, in relation to this process of observing oneself, what goes on the whole time when one is observing other people and things: one is constantly (and cannot help it) interpreting and analyzing. It is very difficult indeed, but possible, to get away from this. (10)

Quality of Attention

The quality of perception and self-observation depends on the level and degree of attention brought to the situation and circumstance at hand. A traditional Sufi story illustrates this contention:

A Sufi was a witness in a court case. The judge said: “How many steps did this man fall down?” The Sufi said, “I don’t know.” “You mean to say that you put yourself forward as a witness,” shouted the judge, “and you cannot answer a simple question?” The Sufi said: “And how long has Your Honor been a judge in this court?” “Twenty years,” the judge replied. “And can you tell me the number of beams in the roof of this hall?” (11)

The importance of developing attention in the process of self-observation was often stressed by Gurdjieff: “First you must strive to acquire attention. Correct self-observation is possible only after you have acquired a measure of attention. Begin with small things.”

The foundation of self-knowledge is patient observation of the workings of our body-mind's functioning. With persistent effort the quality of attention and observation will gradually increase, developing a capacity to become aware of moments and periods of inattention:

One has to get acquainted with the mind and its way of operation. How does one get acquainted? One has to get acquainted with the restlessness of the body and the mind. Instead of resisting the momentum of the mind, start watching. Man has not been educated to watch. He has to learn to watch and start watching for the fraction of a second. The alertness of watching will be lost again and again, but the moment one is aware of the inattention, one comes back to attention. Learning how to observe is the beginning. It is a voyage to be taken inwards, to be taken in the solitude of aloneness. (12)

When we begin to practice self-observation we quickly find that our attention is constantly shifting as we are diverted by external stimuli, passing thoughts and emotions. Although our power of attention may be weak when we first begin to observe ourselves, with practice it gradually strengthens:

However damaged my attention-function is, still it is possible for me to pay at least a minimal kind of attention to my inner processes of thought, emotion, bodily sensation, and movement. I can begin to notice my moods and how they shift. I can begin to notice my postures, how I sit, how I walk, my tone of voice, and my facial expressions. I can notice negative emotions. These provide me with a beginning practice in order to *repair my attention-function*. Only through sustained and honest struggle to observe will my attention grow and develop. (13)

The observation of one's thoughts, emotions, sensations and actions requires a special effort of attention which has been likened to a mirror in which objects are reflected just as they are. "The Silent Witness pays attention to what goes on in the centers: the head, the heart and the body. It simply pays attention. It is simply being aware, as though each function has a mirror placed in front of it."

I spoke about a method of observation of self which requires a special effort with attention: a division of attention into two parts. One of these parts is directed towards whatever activity it's engaged in, whether it be thought or action or whatever, and the other is directed to the experience of a point of awareness of what is going on. I call it the Silent Witness. It's an impartial, unjudgmental witness to what goes on. It is extremely difficult to do this, and you will find at first that you can only do it for a split second, and then you find yourself with your attention wholly drawn into what you're doing; but with practice it becomes more possible. (14)

To truly observe ourselves we need a quality of attention of a higher level than our ordinary attention. "Without a different attention, we are obliged to be automatic. With an attention that is voluntarily directed, we go towards consciousness."

We undertake the struggle to be vigilant, to watch – the struggle of the watchman. We seek to have a watchman in us who is stable. The one who watches is the one who is present . . . Observation of myself shows me how better to concentrate and strengthens the attention. It makes me see that I do not remember myself, that I do not see my state of sleep. I am fragmented, my attention is dispersed, and there is no force that is available to see. When I awaken, I make an effort to disengage enough attention to oppose this dispersion, and to see it. This is a state that is more voluntary. Now there is a watchman, and this watchman is a different state of consciousness. I must always remember that I do not know what I am, that the whole problem is *who* is present. (15)

When we begin to observe ourselves we see only the mechanical conditioned nature of our thoughts, feelings and sensations. But gradually the actual act of observing produces a direct contact with the reality of who we are:

The wish to *know* arises in me – not to know a specific thing, but to know who is here, what I am at this very moment. The place is taken. I feel it in the tensions, in the ideas that cross my mind without stopping, in the waves of emotions that respond. I do not try to resist, nor to withdraw or distract myself. This is the way I am. I accept it. And in living it, I see it *as it is*, as if I see further, through it, becoming more and more free. I see my inattention. I realize that my being depends on this power of seeing, and that I am free not to take one part of myself for the whole, free not to be isolated in one part. I need to develop an attention that is pure and sufficiently intense not to be diverted by subjective reactions. I return tirelessly to the root of my perception. In this movement my attention purifies itself and little by little eliminates the elements foreign to a direct perception. Only the impression of reality remains. (16)

Agent of Transformation and Change

The actual process of self-observation itself produces self-change. “Human possibilities are very great. You cannot conceive even a shadow of what a person is capable of attaining.”

Self-study and self-observation, if rightly conducted, bring man to the realization of the fact that something is wrong with his machine and with his functions in their ordinary state. A man realizes that it is precisely because he is asleep that he lives and works in a small part of himself. It is precisely for this reason that the vast majority of his possibilities remain unrealized, the vast majority of his powers are left unused . . . Self-observation brings man to the realization of the necessity for self-change. And in observing himself a man notices that self-observation itself brings about certain changes in his inner processes. He begins to understand that

self-observation is an instrument of self-change, a means of awakening. By observing himself he throws, as it were, a ray of light into his inner processes which have hitherto worked in complete darkness. And under the influence of this light the processes themselves begin to change. (17)

Self-observation begins the process of inner change and transformation which leads to freedom from long-standing patterns of behaviour and entry into a more conscious state of presence and being:

By practicing self-observation in this way, a man will notice that it brings about a change in his inner life, and in the processes that flow from it. Self-observation requires an inner division. For observation to be possible, a certain separation between two parts of oneself has to be established. Immediately the question arises about myself: “who observes and who is observed?” And at the same time, this separation brings about the beginning of consciousness, an awareness under which “I” begins to wonder who is really myself, what is “sincere” and what is not. With this inner awareness and the light it projects, the processes that till now took place in complete darkness appear for what they are and are again put in question in relation to what I discover to be me. And this sincere questioning, continuous in the light of an expanding self-consciousness, is the very ferment which will make possible all further changes. Self-observation is in itself an instrument for awakening to another level of life and, consequently, a means of transformation. (18)

Self-observation liberates an intelligence that objectively and honestly recognizes the mechanical conditioned nature of our mental, emotional and physical life. “To the degree that self-observation is impartial then an inner space is created between the object and the subject in which intelligence can appear.”

Observing how my life is being lived as impartially as possible (like a scientist looking at a virus through a microscope) allows my natural intelligence to enter and I begin to directly sense and feel what is being observed – direct, unfiltered impressions of postures, breathing, thoughts, feelings, actions, inaction. In this way I begin to recognize by the evidence of my own observation that I am not the indivisible person I have taken myself to be, but many “I”s, each with its own agenda, often quite contradictory. These “I”s feed on my energy, capture my attention, lead me here and there. (19)

The process of self-observation allows us to separate from the conditioned personality and ego patterns that govern our life and prevent the full flowering of our potential. “The act of observation changes your relationship with reactive patterns. You see them as patterns, not as what you are or as what is real. As you continue to observe, you will see other ways of working with what arises in experience.”

Become the spectator, become aware of the natural flow of life, your motives, actions and what results from them. Observe the walls you have built around yourself. As you become more aware of your body and mind you will come to know yourself. As this image of things as you believe them to be subsides, you will have a clear insight of what you are – something quite other than a product of the mind. You will gradually feel less and less involved in whatever comes up and one day you will discover yourself to be in the perceiving. Once you free yourself from the idea, “I am a body” and the consequences of this idea, you will awaken to your natural state of being. Give yourself up entirely to this discovery. True awareness cannot be obtained by projecting known factors in terms of concepts and perceptions. What you are fundamentally cannot be experienced through reason and is only reached once you eliminate what you are not. (20)

Opening to Higher Possibilities

When we first begin to carefully observe ourselves we see the chaotic nature of our inner life. But as we develop the ability to observe clearly, we become more conscious and awake and are able to use our energy more effectively as the bonds of past conditioning are gradually weakened:

One of the first insights that come to people that look within is a recognition that their mind is out of control; it is untrained and turbulent, filled with thoughts and plans and reactions and likes and dislikes. There is a constant barrage of sense impressions and a series of reactions to them. This constant stream of mental and physical events seems very solid. But as the mind becomes more concentrated, as it becomes focused and still, we begin to penetrate through the layers of thought and see how the thoughts and emotions simply arise and pass away moment by moment. We can examine the seemingly solid experience of body sensations and sound and sight, and see that, like the mind, they too are actually a process that is in constant change. (21)

Self-observation is not a mental activity or a thinking process. It requires a quiet, sensitive and alert mind. “To observe without contradiction is like following a fast current, a torrent, anticipating the rushing water with one’s look, seeing the movement of each little wave. There is no time to formulate, to name or to judge.” The reality of who we are can only be perceived with a fine energy or intelligence in ourselves that sees *what is* objectively and impartially:

Usually when I try to observe, there is a point from which the observation is made, and my mind projects the idea of observing, of an observer separate from the object observed. But the idea of observing is not the observing. Seeing is not an idea. It is an act, the act of seeing. Here the object is me, a living being that needs to be

recognized in order to live a certain life. This observation is not that of a fixed observer looking at an object. It is one complete act, an experience that can take place only if there is no separation between what sees and what is seen, no point from which the observation is made. Then there is a feeling of a special kind, a *wish to know*. It is an affection that embraces everything that I see and is indifferent to nothing. I need to see. When I begin to see, I begin to love what I see. No longer separate, I am in contact with it, intensely, completely. I *know*, and this knowing is the result of this new condition. I wake up to what I am and touch the source of pure love, a quality of being. (22)

As the practice of self-observation ripens and matures the ability to remain aware and in the present moment strengthens and deepens. “Sustained observation throughout the day, and in daily relationships, will help human beings grow into a qualitatively different awareness. Be aware of the objective challenges and subjective reactions simultaneously in one sweep of attention.”

Through self-observation, more *presence* comes into your life automatically. The moment you realize that you are not present, you *are* present. Whenever you are able to observe your mind, you are no longer trapped in it. Another factor has come in, something that is not of the mind: the witnessing presence. Be present as the watcher of your mind – of your thoughts and emotions as well as your reactions in various situations. Be at least as interested in your reactions as in the situation or person that causes you to react. Notice also how often your attention is in the past or future. Don’t judge or analyze what you observe. Watch the thought, feel the emotion, observe the reaction. Don’t make a personal problem out of them. You will then feel something more powerful than any of those things that you observe: the still, observing presence itself behind the content of your mind, the silent watcher. (23)

References

- (1) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), p. 105.
- (2) Patty de Llosa *The Practice of Presence* (Sandpoint, Idaho: Morning Light Press, 2006), p. 7.
- (3) Vimala Thakar *Totality in Essence* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), p. 28.
- (4) Jean Vayssé *Toward Awakening* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 34.
- (5) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 105-106.
- (6) Hugh Ripman *Questions and Answers Along the Way* (Washington, D.C.: Forthway Center Press, 2009), p. 12.
- (7) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 18.
- (8) Stuart Litvak and Wayne Senzee *More Ways to Use Your Head* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), pp. 59-60.

- (9) Dennis Lewis "Gurdjieff and the Further Reaches of Self-observation"
www.breath.org/self-observation
- (10) Hugh Ripman *Questions and Answers Along the Way* (Washington, D.C.: Forthway Center Press, 2009), p. 59.
- (11) Idries Shah *Evenings with Idries Shah* (London: Designist Communications, 1989), p. 29.
- (12) Vimala Thakar *Totality in Essence* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), pp. 77-78.
- (13) Red Hawk *Self-Observation: The Awakening of Conscience* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 2009), p. 25.
- (14) Hugh Ripman *Questions and Answers Along the Way* (Washington, D.C.: Forthway Center Press, 2009), p. 54.
- (15) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), pp. 20-21.
- (16) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), p. 42.
- (17) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 145-146.
- (18) Jean Vayssé *Toward Awakening* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 45-46.
- (19) William Patterson *Spiritual Survival in a Radically Changing World-Time* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2009), p. 380.
- (20) Jean Klein *I Am* (Santa Barbara: Third Millennium Publications, 1989), pp. 8-9.
- (21) Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p. 70.
- (22) Jeanne de Salzmann *The Reality of Being* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), pp. 24-25.
- (23) Eckhart Tolle *The Power of Now* (Vancouver: Namaste Publications, 1997), pp. 45-46.