

14 February 1966

READING 4

‘OBSERVATION’ (continued)

PART 1

When one tries to ‘*observe*’, the important question arises, ‘Who is it that is doing the observing?’ A talk on this subject with the Shankaracharya in August 1964 began in this way:

Our eyes receive impressions but they don’t see without the nerves which transmit to the sensory mechanism of the brain. So this sensory mechanism is observing the reactions in the eye to the impressions. But this observation is meaningless unless mind (Manas) relates these particular impressions to past experience and to other impressions received simultaneously. [There exists a central headquarters, a main switchboard (Buddhi or ‘Soul’) which is observing the mental changes.] So Buddhi is observing Manas and at the same time it is being observed by the changing ego (Ahankar) – (the ‘I’s arising from the different centres). But the changing ego is being observed by Real I (Atman or ‘Spirit’), which alone is not observed by anything else but itself. So Real I alone is the True Observer, realized only by the Buddhi when it is *still*; and the more you try to observe, the nearer you get to Real I.

R. Our first Instructor was always saying, ‘Observe, observe, observe,’ but without special methods we never got very far.

S. Nevertheless, he was absolutely right; you had the right training. He told (with much laughter) this story to illustrate how one has to begin, and show the relation of the ordinary ‘ego’ to the Atman:

Once there was a king who felt the need of a Saint, but there wasn’t one around, so he sent an expedition in charge of one of his ministers to comb the forests and other remote places, but though they found various kinds of men with long hair and beards who were supposed to be holy, they couldn’t find a genuine Saint. So, in desperation, after the first month of the three allotted to them, the minister said to the most intelligent of the servants, ‘There’s nothing for it, you’ll have to learn this role. You must sit meditating intensively, and perhaps in two months you’ll look the part. Anyway, quite a lot of hair will grow on your head and chin!

At the end of three months the expedition returned and presented the servant to the king, who duly accepted him as holy. The situation having been saved, the minister said to the servant – ‘All right, now have a haircut, and get on with your job of serving me.’ But the servant said – ‘No, I don’t serve you any more; for while I was meditating I discovered what I have always really wanted, and now I’m going for that alone.’ (25 August 1964)

Moral: Whoever you are and whatever your motives, just go through the motions of meditating according to the directions and you will find your own guidance on the way.

PART 2. ‘WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE TRY TO OBSERVE?’

We can now ask again the question put to us by Mr. Ouspensky in his Fifth Psychological Lecture and quote his answer, which is just as relevant now as it was thirty years ago:

Now try to formulate what you noticed when you tried to observe yourself.

You noticed three things: *First*, that you do not remember yourself, i.e. that you are not aware of your Self at the time you try to observe yourself.

[You recall that story of the ten men who counted heads after swimming across the Ganges, whoever counted always made it nine, forgetting himself.]

Second, that observation is made difficult by the incessant stream of thoughts, images, echoes of conversation, fragments of emotions flowing through your mind and very often distracting your attention from observation. And *third*, that the moment you start self-observation something in you starts imagination, and self-observation – if you really tried it – (all too easily) becomes a constant struggle with imagination.

‘Imagination’ is the running commentary that starts up as a come-back from the machine directly you try to get free of it by ‘setting up an observer’. It always distorts or exaggerates, and exaggeration (to quote an old Chinese proverb) ‘is to paint a snake and add legs’. So we must recognise imagination at once, and have no belief in it, otherwise we are bound to come to wrong conclusions.

Innumerable stories illustrate all this. Perhaps the most famous is the one told us by Mr. Resuhi during his visit. I have heard it told also by the Shankaracharya. Here is Mevlana’s own version from the *Mathnawi* (Book 1, v. 245 et seq.):

You are judging (others) from the analogy of yourself, but you have fallen far, far. Consider well!

There was a greengrocer who had a parrot, a sweet-voiced, green, talking parrot.

Perched on the bench it would watch over the shop and talk finely to all the traders.

In addressing human beings it would speak; but it was skilled too in the song of parrots.

One day it flew up from the bench; and as it sprang it knocked over the bottles and spilled the rose oil.

Its master came from his home and... saw that the bench was full of oil and his clothes covered in it; he smote the parrot on the head; it became bald from the blow.

For some days it did not speak at all; the greengrocer in repentance heaved deep sighs, tearing his beard and saying, ‘Alas! The Sun of my possessions has gone under the clouds. Would that my hand had been paralysed at that moment! How did I come to strike the head of that sweet-tongued bird?’

He sat for three days and three nights on the bench distraught and sorrowful... showing the bird every kind of marvel so that maybe it would begin to speak.

Meanwhile a bare-headed dervish clad in his *jawlaq* (coarse woollen robe) passed by, with a head hairless as the outside of bowl and basin.

Thereupon the parrot began to talk, and screeched at the dervish: ‘Hey fellow! How did you get so bald? Have you, too, been spilling oil from the bottles?’

The bystanders laughed at the parrot’s inference, since it deemed the wearer of the robe to be like itself. Do not measure the actions of Holy Men by analogy with your own.

Apart from the moral, ‘Don’t judge others by yourself’, this story also shows that, to beat the parrot over the head is not the way to treat it! The greengrocer should understand his parrot better (perhaps keep the bottle out of the way); just as the charioteer should understand his horses (the five centres).

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