

4 June 1973

READING 3

A SYSTEM FOR SELF-STUDY

FOREWORD

In the construction of the framework of self-knowledge (which you have been promised) as a System that anybody in our contemporary society could understand and practise, three ingredients have proved essential. A few people equipped with technical knowledge have had to keep abreast of the voluminous literature in the ever-changing science of neuropsychiatry extracting the essentials. Others must be understanding and practising the instructions of those who have realized the full human possibility, concealed as it is by the veil of language and errors of interpretation. But all concerned in this study can take it further by constantly trying to practise whatever they can of the instructions given. Even the little that we have achieved so far has revealed wonderful new possibilities that unfold as older theories rapidly become outdated.

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PART 1

The beginning, middle and end of any System which is going to work, is the acceptance of the idea of the eternal presence of Pure Consciousness or 'Real I' in every human being – as the one permanent Reality that must be distinguished from the ever-changing nature of man's bodily and psychological cycles. Of the existence of this Presence, being neither definable nor susceptible to a purely scientific approach, the only proof must be that first-hand experience which can be communicated only to people who share it.

Next, we have to settle on that part of our human nature from which to begin. The obvious one is that most important part of Mind with which we can all become intimately familiar at first-hand. It is the part that we habitually feel and refer to as 'my mind' or 'my head' – the part that functions immediately behind the forehead and is based on what are technically called the 'frontal lobes of the cerebral hemispheres'. This part is not only the climax of evolution of *Homo sapiens* above all other forms of Organic Life, but it is so intricate, voluminous and subtle, that only now is its true function being elucidated scientifically.

Moreover, it is the foundation of the idea of the charioteer or chauffeur – that chief servant of the Pure Consciousness called in the Acharya terminology the 'Buddhi', for which we have yet to find an English equivalent. It seems so appropriate that this ultimate region of Mind, to which all information has to be relayed before we become aware of it, should also be the one to which we have direct and easy access.

Recent studies in clinics for neuropsychiatry, notably in Moscow, have proved that the essential function of these frontal lobes is *definitely not thinking, but selective, and chiefly the elimination of the irrelevant.*

The frontal lobes are the most recently evolved and, as Jackson (1874) called them, the least organised structure of the cerebral cortex, implying by this term that they are the least differentiated part and their individual zones are the most capable of replacing one another.

(A. R. Luria, *The Working Brain*, Penguin Press 1972, p.221)

It has been natural to enquire what changes are observable in people who have damage to their frontal lobes. If the damage is anything much less than total there seems, for the above reasons, superficially to be very little change. They seem to be in all respects normal, except that they have difficulty in maintaining attention and, therefore, appear to be lacking in 'drive'. Even in people who have lost most of both frontal lobes through trauma, local disease, or surgery, careful tests have been needed to show exactly where their trouble lies. The conclusion reached from very many observations is, that they are unable to carry out the simplest instruction for more than a few moments because every impulse causes a change of direction and forgetfulness of the instruction received. Any series of planned actions therefore becomes impossible for them and is quickly replaced by completely stereotyped behaviour.

A notable case was that of a Russian whose frontal lobes had both been replaced by large cysts; being discharged from hospital as incurable, along with another patient, he intended to go straight to his home which was several hundred kilometres away. But this proved impossible for him – one impulse led to another till he merely imitated his companion and settled down in a neighbouring town with a job in a shoe factory!

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We can now happily leave the field of pathology, and study in ourselves how much the full function of this essential 'servant' (who only works at his full potential when he is full of the right energy) can be achieved by a process of refinement. The way lies through the constant reminder of a single overriding aim (e.g., to merge with the Pure Consciousness); the setting up of one-pointed attention on that aim for short periods by the successive discarding of all irrelevancies; and the liberation of the mind from all forms of identification either with objects of sensation, or thoughts and desires, or the false ego and other causes of illusion.

The most direct and universal way of achieving this would be two half-hours a day of the System of Meditation we have been given, which can take us a very long way until the love of Param-Atman can take over. The stages of this process of refinement or 'giving up' are the stages of the Shankaracharya's recent version of the Ladder of Self-realization.

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PART 2

The function of these frontal lobes (especially what is known as the 'prefrontal region') must not be regarded as an intellectual or thinking apparatus. On the contrary, if it is to fulfil its true function as a *reflecting screen*, it must be cleared of all thoughts, prejudices and 'preconceived ideas'. This passage from Chapter 10 of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* though written so long ago, comes much nearer the conclusion to which the current evidence is pointing:

The infinite sphere which represents our world is constantly changing like a cinema screen on which a stream of pictures follow one another. If the sphere is the screen, then our consciousness is the light which projects the pictures whose reflections on the screen we call life.

The most incomprehensible aspect of life, as we see it, is that the pictures themselves represent our own store of impressions and yet we derive our impressions from the projected images on the screen of the same pictures.

Suppose a man wishes to study the cinema and, not knowing of the existence of the projector and film, tries to construct hypotheses from what he sees on the screen. Obviously he will get nowhere till he turns his back on the screen and discovers the cause of the images, i.e. the light, the projector and the film (our consciousness and its reflection produced by our mental apparatus). To understand life we must study our consciousness and mental equipment.

(from *An abridgement of P. D. Ouspensky's Tertium Organum*, Stourton Press, Cape Town, 1961, p.65)

Let us find the way to do this day by day and week by week:

1. Try to remember yourself as often as possible and in the most varied conditions.
2. Try to save mental energy whenever your attention is free by lifting the habitual burden which is carried so constantly by this good servant the Mind.
3. Learn to attend fully to the requirements of the present moment discarding unnecessary thoughts of the past or the future.

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Members of a group might make a pact, for instance, to remember each other at a certain time every day.

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