

## From Self-Observation to Self-Discovery

All research scientists have to learn how to observe – to be impartial, to avoid superimposing preconceived ideas, to avoid making assumptions about causes, and to be careful not to dismiss anything that seems to go against current theories. It is not as easy as you might imagine as the mind has a tendency to subtly alter what we observe. (See this Wikipedia list of the different ways it does this: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cognitive\\_biases](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases)).

Some time ago we looked at recent discoveries in neuroscience that explain what is going on. (See *20130130 Why Practise Attention*). The following is an extract from that paper:

Deep in the brain, something is processing all the input we receive from the outside sensory world and from our inner world, preselecting and applying emotional colour to it *before* it reaches our conscious experience. He [James Austin] calls this processing ‘preattention’:

At ordinary levels of living, we keep paying another hidden price to be sheltered by all our preattentive layers. For we constructed these layers to admit only those things that our conditioning led us to believe were relevant. Sheltered by our biased preselection processes, we mindlessly perpetuate old unfruitful habits and prejudiced attitudes. Moreover much of this preattentive protection makes it very difficult for perception to fully open up to the true miracle of each event of everyday living. [James Austin, *Zen and the Brain*, chapter 63]

To put this in the language of our own traditions, in order to protect itself, the illusory separate self superimposes its own preconceived ideas and habits of thinking on our raw experience. It is for this reason that impartial, sincere observation needs to come directly from that place of wide open, uncoloured stillness ‘behind the mind’ which we have recently been exploring. Dr Roles described this as ‘polishing the mirror of Consciousness’:

We are now at the stage when we should be able to bring what we are being taught more into relation with ordinary life. Self-observation begins and ends with the gradual purification or polishing of the reflecting mirror of Consciousness, which all of us carry in the front half of the brain that lies immediately behind the forehead. [FCR: 74/23]

Mr Ouspensky used the analogy of a cinema screen:

The ‘infinite sphere’ in the guise of which we represent our world, is constantly and unceasingly changing; at every new moment it is *no longer the same* as it was the moment before. There goes on in it a continual shifting of pictures, images, relationships. It is for us like a cinema screen where projections of pictures follow one another in a fast-flowing stream.

But where are the pictures themselves? Where is the light that projects them on the screen? Where do the pictures come from and where do they go?

If the ‘infinite sphere’ is the cinema screen, then our consciousness is the *light*. Penetrating through our mental apparatus, i.e. through our store of impressions (the pictures), it projects on the screen their reflections which we call *life*.

But whence do the impressions reach us?

*From the same screen.*

In this lies the most incomprehensible aspect of life as we see it. We both create it and get everything from it.

Imagine a man in an ordinary cinema theatre. Let us suppose that he knows nothing about the workings of a cinema, is ignorant of the existence of a projector *behind his back* and of small transparent pictures on a moving strip. Let us imagine that he wishes to *study* the cinema and starts by studying what he sees on the screen - taking notes and photographs, observing the sequence of pictures, calculating, constructing hypotheses, and so on.

To what conclusions can he come?

Obviously to none at all until he turns his back on the screen and begins to study the *causes of the appearance of pictures on the screen*. The causes are in the projector (i.e. in consciousness) and in the moving strips of pictures (our mental apparatus). It is they that should be studied if one wishes to understand the 'cinema'.

Positivist philosophy studies nothing but the *screen* and the pictures projected on it. Consequently the question of where the pictures come from and where they go, and *why* they come and go instead of remaining eternally the same, remains a perpetual riddle for it.

But a *cinema* should be studied by beginning with the *source of light*, i.e. with *consciousness*; then one should pass on to the *pictures* on the moving strip, and only later should one study the *projections*.  
[*Tertium Organum*, Chapter 10]

Rupert Spira uses a similar analogy:

Just as the screen seems to be overtaken by the qualities of the film that appears on it, so our essential being seems to be overtaken by the qualities of the body and mind.

For instance the screen seems to become blue when the sky appears in the film, but blueness never becomes an essential quality of the screen. It just seems to colour it temporarily. Our being has become coloured by the qualities of the mind and body in the same way, to such an extent that it seems to have actually become those qualities.

The screen is, in fact, colourless and it is precisely this colourlessness that enables it to assume all colours without itself ever actually becoming a colour. Likewise, our essential being is objectless, transparent, open, empty, aware presence – it has no objective qualities that pertain to the body or mind – and it is precisely because of this that we are capable of the entire range of thoughts, feelings and perceptions without ever actually becoming a thought, feeling or perception.

In fact, all thoughts, feelings and perceptions shine primarily with the light of our essential nature, by which they are illumined or known, irrespective of their particular characteristic, just as all images shine with the light of the screen.

When the film starts we forget the screen and pay attention only to the film. In fact, the screen seems to become an image. This is what happens to our essential being. It seems to have become taken over by thoughts, feelings and images so as to be indistinguishable from them.

Thus this inadvertent mixture of our self with a collection of thoughts, feelings, images and sensations has taken root in us to such an extent, and is so encouraged by our culture and education, that it is now normal to think and, more importantly, to feel our self as a sort of collage of such thoughts, feelings, images and sensations.

We have forgotten our essential identity of pure aware being and allowed it to become mixed up with the characteristics and qualities that define the body and mind. Most people live almost

constantly in this state of amnesia and their lives are a reflection of this simple forgetting.

[*Presence Vol 1 – The Art of Peace and Happiness: The Forgetting of our Essential Being*]

Self-observation shows us first that we are not the body. The body is constantly changing but our essential being does not change. Then we see that we are not the mind, as this too is constantly changing. We see that what we really are lies in the opposite direction at the other end of the line of attention – that ‘place behind the mind’. We see that we are that which *observes* the mind, the body and the world – the witnessing presence of awareness. As we discussed last term, this is a major step towards understanding our true nature, Real ‘I’. From there, we go on to investigate the characteristics of the awareness that we know ourselves to be and self-observation starts to become Self-abidance, or in Mr Ouspensky’s terminology, Self-remembering.

So we need to learn how to be good research scientists – interested in and specialising in investigating the nature of what we really are. In order to do this, self-observation not only needs to be accurate and impartial, it also needs to become effortless and as close to continuous as we can manage, and that happens through a natural interest or desire. As Mr Ouspensky said:

Self-observation is simply a method of self-study. And it’s only when you want to know yourself and want to study yourself that it becomes serious.

The efforts we can make are efforts of self-observation and self-remembering. When people hear about effort, they think about an effort of ‘doing’. That would be lost effort or wrong effort, but effort of self-observation and self-remembering is right effort because it can give right results.

[*A Record of Meetings*]

Here is some advice from Rupert Spira on how, through natural interest, self-observation paves the way for Self-remembering:

*Become interested* in that which knows your experience. Give the attention that you previously gave to objects – that is thoughts, sensations and perceptions – give your attention to that which *knows* those objects. Everything that we have ever longed for in terms of peace, happiness and love resides there. It doesn’t reside in the objects. ...

All experience, irrespective of its qualities or characteristics is pervaded by the experience of ‘being aware’. Simply notice that. Tune in to that. Be in touch with that instead of losing yourself to the objects of the mind, the body and the world. ...

Cease being exclusively fascinated by thoughts and feelings, by sensations and perceptions. Allow this experience of being aware to come out of the background of experience and to fill the foreground. Make this your primary interest. It is not necessary to reject or lose interest in the objects of the mind, the body and the world, but make consciousness your *primary* interest. After all, it is the *reality* of all experience.

[*Webinar meditation, 24/7/14*]

It is when this interest grows into a deep love for the real Self, that the power of the illusory separate self, ego, to take us away from what we love starts to wither away.

## Contemplation

*The sky doesn’t need to get rid of the clouds in order to be the open, empty sky; the screen doesn’t need to get rid of an image in order to be the transparent screen. Our Self, Awareness, doesn’t need to get rid of any appearance of the mind, body or world in order to rest in and as itself.*

[Rupert Spira]