

Self-observation & Attention

Even a little self-observation demonstrates the truth that human beings are mechanical. It becomes obvious how a favourite posture produces the same kind of feeling and how a particular feeling directs our thoughts. The three main parts of our machine are intimately connected—it must be so in order that we can function coherently as a single unit—and so we revolve continually around a limited repertoire of ‘roles’, the parts we play in life, where the different ‘I’s who make up these characters come and go imperceptibly in the unfolding drama of our existence.

How can we be different? One answer lies in the idea that different functions require different energy. If we wish to function differently we need a different kind of energy.

The System describes a ‘fourth room’ in our house where there are two further centres, mostly unknown to us, which can manifest two quite different kinds of consciousness and many quite different functions. The first is higher emotional centre. This is fuelled by the energy of Self-consciousness which can illuminate everything that can be known about oneself as an individual, all at once. One of its functions is called Self-remembering.

The second is higher intellectual centre. This is fuelled by objective, or cosmic consciousness, which takes in the whole universe. One of its functions is called Self-realisation. It is said that this is the highest form of consciousness possible for a human being and that the individual who realises it becomes ‘immortal within the limits of the solar system.’ Neither of these two higher centres possess any negative part. There is no ‘NO’ in them. The negative parts of the three lower centres are what keep us imprisoned and in our normal state we cannot imagine what it could be like to think or feel without ‘NO’. Nevertheless, at some time or another we have all probably experienced something like this and it is worth trying to remember those moments more clearly.

The System tells us it is possible to become open to these higher forms of consciousness by improving the general condition of our waking state. Somehow, we have to lift our ordinary daytime state, to improve our general level of energy, so that the three main centres can begin to resonate, or communicate with the higher levels of our nature.

The good news is that nature has given us the tools to do this. Nevertheless, we still have to teach ourselves to use them. Learning to use our power of attention is the first step—because to allow our thinking, feeling and moving centres to function less mechanically requires a different use of attention. A different kind of attention produces a different kind of function.

Functions and consciousness are different things. Functions can exist without consciousness and consciousness can exist without functions. Take the moving centre. It is obvious that it works very differently in different states of consciousness. In the daytime state it walks and talks and performs all the moving functions necessary to our waking lives. In sleep at night its functions are reduced to mumbling and twitching in a dim response to whatever is going on in the dreaming state. It is said that in comparison to what we could be—were we to ‘wake-up’—our normal waking state is similar to this dim mumbling and twitching,

In mechanical parts of centres attention is scattered and intermittent. Attention comes and goes without any *intention*. ‘It’ talks, ‘it’ thinks, ‘it’ feels. In the course of the day the greater part of all our talking is entirely mechanical, and if there is no-one around we talk to ourselves. This arises in the moving centre. If we are not talking, or just to help us go *on* talking, we tap our fingers, bounce our knees up and down and generally fidget about. Mr Ouspensky’s teacher told him, ‘By your mechanical movements I can see that you’re a booby.’

The mechanical part of intellectual centre is a special case. It is also called 'formatory centre'. The key to observing it is that it only understands in terms of 'yes' or 'no' Everything is black or white, right or wrong, and there is no middle ground. Consequently it distorts everything it gets hold of. Formatory centre is really just a registering apparatus, it receives information and impressions. But because the higher parts of the centre, where the processing of information should occur, are starved of the attention necessary for them to do their work, formatory centre tries to do all the work itself. The result is that we understand nothing whilst being quite convinced that we *do* understand.

Attention begins to rise above the mechanical level by becoming emotional. Attention is caught, and then held by an emotional element which provides more energy. This is still mechanical but being more energetic it has more possibilities. We might say, 'I'm really *interested* in this', and this *interest* is a property of the emotional part of intellectual centre. It allows us to understand more.

Attention stops being mechanical when it is directed on purpose. There may initially be an emotional element to this, we may have to solve a problem, or understand something for some vital reason and so we hold and direct our attention. The intellectual part of the intellectual centre has the capacity for creation, construction, invention and discovery. It cannot work without attention, but here the attention must be focused and kept there by will and effort.

There is yet another kind of attention which we might call passive attention. First keeping still, we allow the field of our attention to widen without effort. We focus on nothing but the feeling of 'I in this moment. We say neither 'yes' nor 'no' to anything. In this practice the ordinary intellectual and emotional centres begin to imitate the working of higher centres.

Regular practice of this kind of attention alone will be enough to start us on the Way. HH Shantanand Saraswati has this to say about people who learn to provide themselves with this entirely restful stillness.

"Firstly, they show love and affection toward everything they encounter. All activities will be initiated with love, and then held and nourished with love till they come to their fulfilment. All relationships with individuals or activities, direct or indirect, will be lighted and guided only by love and affection.

"Secondly, their ideas, intentions or motives will be pure and simple. Purity and simplicity widen the horizon, and they think and work for the whole of humanity and only through the Laws of the Absolute. The divisions of groups, races or nations disappear and only natural laws are employed. Their thoughts naturally encompass the whole of the human family, and its intrinsic goodness.

"Thirdly, the physical movements of such people are only geared to the natural rhythm, and the result is simplicity and economy of movement. They never rush into any situation; are never agitated; and perform all actions in an efficient, sublime and refined way. Whatever they do will emerge from stillness, be held in stillness, and again submerge in the same stillness which they experience in this great total immobility. This would establish an idea or a standard for the common man to aspire to, if he somehow awakes to the need to improve his lot."

* * *