

EXPLORING THE MIND

*'The poet knows how to observe, to look
at things with complete innocence.'*

Jean Klein

'Know Thyself'

The very first step on the path to self-realization is to gain objective self-knowledge through impartial self-observation of our thoughts, feelings, body and actions. The teachings of Vipassana embody this approach to self-study: "The only way to experience truth directly is to look within, to observe oneself. All our lives we have been accustomed to look outside. We have rarely if ever tried to examine ourselves, our own mental and physical structure, our own actions, our own reality. Therefore, we remain unknown to ourselves. We must gain insight into our own nature in order to understand the nature of existence." (1)

It is very important to become aware of how our body and mind function in everyday life. By impartially observing our life experiences and our habitual reactions to them, we can identify and transform the conditioned patterns of our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and actions.

You must begin by drawing up an inventory of yourself. But it is not by drawing up a list of qualities and defects which is more or less accurate that you will make such an inventory, but by observing yourself from moment to moment. Your impulses, those spontaneous reactions which reveal your sympathies and antagonisms, your daily mechanisms, such as judging yourself, will now stand out clearly. You will then notice that your fundamental desire is to try to make all happenings coincide with what you would like to be or have. The fact of noticing these things will give birth, albeit tentatively at first, to a habit of standing back from the object. Then, without any action of your will, a certain elimination will take place and, from day to day, you will be less inveigled in what you observe . . . However, it is very difficult for many people to accept themselves as they are and to bow down before the reality of facts. One is always escaping from oneself; one never accepts oneself as one is, because one has fallen into the habit of comparing oneself with a model. To reach ultimate knowledge, the only acceptable way is objective vision without choice or judgement. (2)

By watching the activity of our mind and body we can achieve a deeper understanding of our inner and outer worlds, marking the beginning of self-knowledge. Observing our experiences from an impartial viewpoint reveals the many layers of our mental, emotional and physical conditioning. No special knowledge is required for this self-exploration – only a genuine interest in questioning habitual patterns and fixations, and to be cognizant of our inner

reactions and responses. This inner exploration can occur throughout the circumstances of everyday life as we observe our thoughts, emotions, perceptions and actions from a non-reactive and non-judgemental perspective.

The attitude we bring to the practice of self-observation is a crucial factor in becoming more acquainted with the habitual functioning of our body and mind. The proper approach is one of moment-to-moment curiosity and discovery, a welcoming of whatever is present. This is analogous to a scientist carefully studying a phenomenon of nature without any preconceptions or psychological interference. The intention is an objective study without interpretation:

To face ourselves scientifically we must accept the facts as they are without agreement, disagreement or conclusion. It is not a mental acceptance, an acceptance of ideas, but is completely practical, functional. It requires only alertness. Attention must be bipolar. We see the situation and at the same time see how it echoes in us as feeling and thought. In other words, the facts of a situation must include our own reactions. We remain in the scientific process free from judgement, interpretation and evaluation, only looking in different moments of the day at our psychological, intellectual and physical ground and our level of vitality. There is no motive, no interference from a "me," no desire to change, grow or become . . . In this way we become more intimate with ourselves, more aware of how we function in everyday life. As explorers, there is openness, receptivity, a welcoming that brings originality and life to every moment. (3)

The practice of impartial observation is a faculty we must learn. At first, self-observation is polluted by habitual thoughts, memories, judgements and interpretations. To observe ourselves properly is a skill which requires conscious attention and repeated effort. Because of our conditioning we see things partially, often with preconceived ideas. Therefore, we never see anything completely, with the totality of our mind and the fullness of our heart. Only through the light of awareness is it possible to change by honestly seeing and acknowledging the conditioning that our psychological and biological nature has undergone. Until we truly know ourselves, our habitual thoughts, feelings, perceptions and actions will rule our behaviour and limit our possibilities:

The only way out is to simply observe. This allows us to take note of our physical reactions, our mental attitudes and patterns and our motivations at the exact moment they appear. It involves no evaluation, no analysis which is based on memory. At first the observer might find it difficult to be impersonal, to free themselves from evaluating. We tend to emphasize the object and thus become its accomplice. Later, however, observing itself is emphasized and becomes more natural, more frequent. Then comes a time when a neutrality installs itself between the observer and what is observed, and both poles lose their driving force. (4)

Self-observation is not an easy task; the obstacles are significant and relentless, yet the outcome is rewarding. Ingrained habits and the natural tendency of the mind to avoid attending to present-moment experience must be overcome in order to successfully observe our body-mind activity. The challenge is to be fully present, to be alert and sensitive to the reality of the moment:

In the beginning observation may not be easy; suddenly likes and dislikes arise, judgments come, deep-rooted habits assert themselves. Before you know it, the state of observation lapses into a state of interpretation, evaluation, judgment. But if you want to learn how to observe, avoid struggling with the lapses; simply become aware of them. Your sensitivity will grow and the duration of your observation will gradually increase. (5)

To know oneself is a challenging task, as there is a constant resistance to seeing oneself as we really are, not as we imagine oneself to be. As well, most people lack a stable, enduring power of attention. Effective self-observation requires complete attention, which usually does not occur because our life is spent wasting energy in *inattention*. To be fully present, to be alert and sensitive to our inner and outer worlds, is atypical for most people. Although it is virtually impossible to be attentive *all* the time, there is a prescription for this lack of attention: to become *aware of* our inattention. Through negation we come to the positive. By perceiving and understanding inattention, the power of attention blossoms.

The first attempts at self-observation may be discouraging as we encounter the seemingly tumultuous nature of our inner world:

As we set out on the path of direct observation, what do we find? First we discover a chaotic inner world of thoughts, concepts, images and emotions. There is an endless round of inner interpretation, speculation, and discussion. Thoughts follow one after another, holding us tight with the power of the feelings and emotions they evoke. In time we may discern a pervasive web of confusion and unhappiness, a seemingly unbreakable pattern of habit and compulsion. Looking at our experience more deeply, we see that this ceaseless activity neither solves our problems nor satisfies our needs. In fact, the more we are caught up in our thoughts and emotions, the more our energy is drained and the farther we are led away from real knowledge and insight. (6)

However, there is a silver lining to the difficulties encountered in facing the reality of our life. Although our initial efforts of self-observation are discouraging and frustrating, we need not lose heart. Growing familiarity with our habitual psychological patterns and the suffering that results support a willingness to change. When we see that we are imprisoned by our own conditioning and the self-image of the ego-structure formed and maintained over time, we can acknowledge the facts and become aware of another way of living – free and conscious.

There are three primary targets of self-observation, each of which has its own particular challenge:

- The physical world of the body and senses – breath, posture, movement, as well as sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations.
- Feelings and emotions, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Typically, when we come into contact with pleasant feelings the tendency is to be attracted and attached; with unpleasant feelings we react with aversion and with neutral feelings we often ignore or dismiss them.
- The mental content of thoughts and images which emerge from nothingness and disappear into nothingness in a constant stream of birth, manifestation and death.

The last two objects of self-observation – thoughts and feelings – are very challenging to observe due to their fleeting nature, and it is often recommended that self-observation begin with the body. Jean Klein: “It might be easier to start with the body sensation. A calm body has a stilling effect on the mind, for body and mind are one. Investigating the body familiarizes you with its contractions, tensions and defenses. In making these objects of observation, you become detached, and the original pure body sensation has an opportunity to emerge.” (7)

Let this body be an object of observation. At first you will feel only the superficial surface of the body but as you sustain the observation you will become aware of different layers of sensation. Become accustomed in your observation to let the observed come to you, you do not go to it. This means you are completely receptive. In the beginning the body will appear to you in fractions but when the looking is sustained there comes a moment when there is a fusion of all the parts and you come to a global feeling of the body. You feel the object-body become more and more subtle and expanded beyond the frontiers of the physical body. When there is no conceptualization, at a certain point observer and observed disappear and there is only pure perception, direct perception. (8)

The body is essentially a vehicle or mechanism with its own needs, sensations, intelligence and healing capabilities. It is also susceptible to pain, tension, reactions and compulsions. It is vitally important to observe and understand the workings of our own body, not conceptually but firsthand during the experiences of daily life. To face a bodily sensation directly without attempting to label, control, escape or analyze it is a very high art. The experience of physical pain challenges our ability to impersonally observe the various manifestations of pain on both the physical and psychological levels. Pain is felt as a perception, a sensation which we typically resist and try to escape from. By accepting the sensation, we learn to see things from a perspective without resistance or judgement. With genuine acceptance there is no longer any fuel for the sensation.

Many spiritual traditions teach the principle of “due measure” or “the middle way” of neither excess nor abstinence when dealing with the needs of the body. The physical body is responsible for processing and assimilating food, air and impressions:

On the physiological level, one could say that you are what you absorb. As soon as you come more in contact with the workings and sensations of your body-mind, you will see how the things you absorb act on you. In this observation free from intention and reaction, you will act intelligently. Where you feel a lack you will make an addition of certain elements, and where you feel a heaviness you will omit certain things, until you come to the organic body, where the expanded, light, energy body is freed. No system can bring you to know yourself in this way – only reaction-free observation, seeing the facts as they are. (9)

Self-observation is the first link in a chain from self-study to self-knowledge to self-realization and wisdom. In the first stage of spiritual development self-observation brings to light those processes that have previously been unconscious and below the level of awareness:

Watch yourself without any identification, comparison, condemnation; just watch, and you will see an extraordinary thing take place. You not only put an end to an activity which is unconscious but, further, you are aware of the motives of that action. If we do not condemn but are aware of it, then the content, the significance of that action begins to open up. Experiment with this and you will see for yourself. Just be aware . . . In that process we begin to understand ourselves – not only the superficial layers of our consciousness, but the deeper, which is much more important; because *there* are all our motives or intentions, our hidden demands, fears, anxieties, appetites. Until those have been completely understood through awareness, there cannot be freedom, happiness and intelligence. (10)

Most people are completely identified with their thoughts. One thought leads to another thought in a chain of associations. Calmly observing this “mental melodrama” breaks the identification and allows a more conscious perspective to unfold. With awareness, thoughts lose their self-centered, compulsive force and enslaving quality. Watching the mind with ‘choiceless awareness’ allows experience to arise moment-to-moment without judgement, resistance or attachment, fully accepting what is happening *now*. In such an open state of awareness we are simply awake to *what is*. Jean Klein: “There is nothing to try to add or subtract from the life you are living. It takes only alertness to see habits of thinking and how these contract us. When we see that almost all of our existence is mechanical repetition, we automatically step out of the pattern and into the unknown.” (11)

When we simply see – moment to moment – what is occurring, observing without judgment or preference, we don’t get lost in thinking. As we begin developing this choiceless awareness, what starts coming within the field of

awareness is quite remarkable: we start seeing the root from which thought arises. We see intention, out of which action comes. We observe the natural process of mind and discover how much of what we so treasured to be ourselves is essentially impersonal phenomena passing by . . . When awareness penetrates a bit deeper, we discover that we've invested the thinking mind with a reality which it doesn't independently possess, not understanding that it is a relative part of something much greater. We discover that we usually notice only a bit of the extraordinary activity of consciousness; attachment to thinking has blocked the rest. Choiceless, open awareness allows everything to unfold naturally. Thinking is choosing, measuring, creating a false reality instead of directly experiencing what is actually happening each moment. (12)

When observation matures it is free of time, memories, and self-image. Then it is able to recognize actual reality, *what is*, as a living process – ever-changing in the timeless present of vast space, silence and emptiness. In a state of alertness and intelligent discrimination, there is no longer preference, attachment or rejection of the flow of life, only a welcoming acceptance of whatever emerges in the present moment.

With practice, self-observation becomes a state of pure witnessing, quiet and silently aware, but ever vigilant. In the state of pristine awareness, the mind is completely open and receptive. Although the outer personality or 'persona' continues, there is no longer any identification with the contents of awareness: only the silent witness remains – the Self:

Initially, it will be found that such an attitude of alert witnessing with a totally silent mind is not easily maintained, for the mind soon reverts to its old patterns of evaluating, taking sides, anticipating, controlling, driven as it always is by desire and fear. But when the awareness is strong and broad enough, witnessing is re-established of its own – easily, naturally – by focusing on the slipping out of the state of impartial observation and dispassionately watching the mind's various antics. Paradoxically, this means becoming attentive to one's inattention. What one will and must discover eventually is a state of pure "beingness," without any differentiation; one is no longer this or that (i.e., anything in particular), neither a body nor a mind; there is no subject nor object. One is that in which all these things have their being. Thus, one is not in the world, but the world is in oneself; one does not act upon the world, but the world happens to oneself. All has its being in the "I am" that shines in every human being. (13)

A sutra in the *Tao Te Ching* reads:

Knowing others is wisdom;
Knowing the self is enlightenment.

Lao Tzu

The Power of Attention

Self-observation is a process, while attention is the energy or “fuel” which allows witnessing to occur. Self-observation and attention can be viewed as “two sides of a coin,” as they have a reciprocal relationship. The quality of attention determines the efficacy of the observation – as the acuity and purity of attention grows, the act of self-observation becomes more productive.

The quality or level of attention applied to our field of experience is often ignored in many religious and philosophical teachings and in the sciences. Yet it is a crucial factor in virtually every human endeavour. When properly employed, attention has the power to focus, choose and discriminate, and attach meaning or significance to an impression, event or relationship. A useful analogy is a searchlight shining a focused beam to illuminate a specific area for a definite purpose. The searchlight does not affect what its beam focuses on, only highlights it with light, but it discriminates different objects from each other and brings special significance to some of them.

Attention has many different qualities and degrees. Spiritual development is very much dependent on our sensitivity and access to more refined levels of attention. In certain teachings three levels of attention are identified:

- At the lowest level, attention is either completely absent (inattention, daydreaming) or unstable, fleeting, distracted, without focus or direction, caught by any passing fancy.
- At a higher level, attention is concentrated and sustained, no longer wandering. The attention can be directed and ‘one-pointed.’ It is sustained by interest or desire. But this type of attention is captive and not really free. For instance, we may believe we are focusing on solving a problem when in fact the problem is absorbing us in its grip.
- The highest degree of attention is conscious: free, voluntary, vigilant, attentive to the needs of the moment. This type of attention is central to inner work and can free us from the prison of the ego with all its mechanical reactions, fears, judgements, cravings, impulses and self-centered behaviour. We always have access to attention; we can always be attentive and present in the moment.

Typically, our attention is ensnared by external or internal impressions rather than being consciously directed and controlled: “Most of the time, my attention is *captured* by outside forces which I may or may not have chosen myself – sights, sounds, colours, etc. – or else by forces within myself – expectations, fears, worries, interests, etc. When it is so captured, I function very much like a machine: I am not *doing* things; they simply *happen*.” (14)

Our habitual absence of attention has been compared to a shepherd thoughtlessly forgetting about his flock of sheep. Or, in another analogy highlighting the lack of stability and continuity, like a flame trying to hold its own in the wind.

Jacob Needleman argues that most people are unaware that their powers of attention are limited and not consciously directed: “The belief that we already know what attention is and that we possess it as a right is short-sighted and naïve, if not dishonest. Is that attention really free, mobile and at our disposal? Is it not instantly dispersed? The question of attention relates not only to thought and the mind, but to the virtually autonomous worlds of emotions, sensation and instinct.” (15)

Our lives are what they are in large part because of the weakness and passivity of our attention. We are *taken*, our attention is taken, swallowed by our stream of automatic thought; we constantly disappear into our emotional reactions; we are taken by our fears and desires, our pleasures and pains, by our daydreams and imaginary worries. And, being *taken*, we no longer exist as I, myself, here. We do not live our lives; we *are lived* and we may eventually die without ever having awakened to what we really are – without having lived. (16)

Directed or concentrated attention is on a higher level than dispersed attention. Here the focus is on one thing at a time. This often occurs in daily life with pilots, surgeons, mountain climbers and others whose attention is sustained and focused in the present moment, sometimes for long periods of time. This is an intermediate level of attention: “We do have some power of attention, at least on the surface, some capacity to point the attention in a desired direction and hold it there. Although it is fragile, this seed or bud of attention is consciousness emerging from deep within us. For it to grow, we need to learn to concentrate, to develop this capacity.” (17)

Directed attention does not hypnotize or stupefy in the same way as does enslaved or dispersed attention. But it does not induce full awakening either. A person using directed attention can still be deeply identified with the task at hand. Their inner space is still completely occupied with whatever they happen to be doing. They have no existence apart, no real being. Only when they learn to withdraw from the task in hand, to maintain a certain thread of awareness which remains apart from thinking, feeling, sensing, do they begin to get the taste of a higher state of consciousness. In this state, the self is not separate and the attention, though directed to whatever the task at hand, is at the same time flexible and open, not rigid and narrow. (18)

The highest degree of attention is conscious, unified, voluntary, open and free. The sense of “I am” or “I am present” is mediated by a pure level of attention. Conscious attention is a property of *being*. When the attention is quietly vigilant, a dynamic equilibrium, both inwards and outwards, emerges. Such a voluntary attention is wholly balanced and equally distributed. In this holistic attention, all the human ‘centers’ and functions are involved: intellectual,

emotional, moving and instinctive. The result is a harmonious development of being in which all aspects of the human being are involved:

On the level of the intellectual centre, the attention acquires a power of vision which is like a light that keeps everything in its field of illumination. On the level of the emotional centre, the attention acquires a warmth that was lacking until then. On the level of the body, the attention is supported by a new phenomenon, which takes many years to get to know well: a sensation of oneself, a sensation that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. By this vision, by this feeling, by this sensation, I know that I am here, present. These are the precursory signs of Consciousness and Will. But this is still not enough. To attain an entirely different quality of attention, I need to know and experience other forms of support. And these I will discover in my relationship to conscious, intentional impressions of myself, impressions of what lives in my being, impressions of what *is*. (19)

The importance of attention as an instrument of inner development is acknowledged in all authentic spiritual teachings. One of the principal aims of the spiritual exercises prescribed in many different traditions is to gain control of the attention so that it is independent and stable, rather than distracted or absorbed. It includes both placing attention in a desired direction and withdrawing attention from something when appropriate. Such an attention is transformative. With conscious attention we can fully express our life with all its possibilities, existing with presence and choiceless awareness in both the outer world and within ourself:

The real power of the faculty of attention, unknown to modern science, is one of the indispensable and most central measures of humanness – of the being of a man or woman – and has been so understood, in many forms and symbols, at the heart of all the great spiritual teachings of the world. The deep meaning of many rules of conduct and moral principles of the past involved the cultivation and development of the uniquely human power of attention, its action in the body, heart and mind of man. To be present, truly present, is to have conscious attention. This capacity is the key to what it means to *be* human. (20)

Attention, when consciously directed, can act as a bridge or intermediary to inner change. A more objective awareness is impossible without conscious control of attention. Our only freedom consists in where to place our attention – how much of it to give in any situation or circumstance to the outer world and how much, in the same moment, to the inner world, including our reactions of like and dislike, our thoughts, and our bodily sensations such as pain and tension. In analogical terms, attention is to awareness as the oil in a lamp is to its flame. As long as there is oil in the lamp, the flame persists. But once the oil is depleted, the flame disappears. Controlling the attention is the one function we possess in which we can exert a certain amount of free will. It is said that a person's level of consciousness can be measured by the freedom of their attention.

What form of attention or inner struggle breaks through and into every circumstance of my life here and now, in the conditions of the modern world? How is the heart, the center of the feeling of myself, to be sought in the life I lead? We are asking about a mode of attention or consciousness that is a bridge between our present level of being and the level of being described in the mystical and contemplative literature of all the traditions. We are not speaking only about the development of the inner world, but of the balance between the inner and outer worlds. We are not asking only about higher experiences, but about that in ourselves which can receive the energy and vision of such experiences and transmit its energy into ourselves. (21)

Inner growth cannot realistically begin until we recognize that we are rarely *present* in our daily lives. Many spiritual traditions emphasize, at the very beginning, the importance of the body in the process of inner development and transformation. When attention is focused on the body there is a movement away from the obtrusive interference of the ego on natural human functioning. This allows contact with the higher aspects of our being.

The light of conscious attention can reveal this truism. Outer life can serve as “food” for inner struggle and growth. The demands of life are viewed as challenges to one’s attention and awareness, by not identifying with external events or internal compulsions. A free, independent attention opens the door to intelligence and awakened being.

The only independent element in our selves is the attention of our mind – not our passing thoughts, but the force of attention that is obscurely linked with our thoughts. This is why all great spiritual traditions are rooted in the understanding of the attention factor in human life and seek always to develop in man a stronger and more enduring quality of independent attention . . . The search begins for an independent attention in oneself that is not ruled by the ego. It means that inwardly one becomes intentionally aware of all the contradictions and compromises that actually make up our social self, or ego. That in us which can accept these facts about ourselves – that fleeting and fragile independent attention of the mind and heart is precisely the seed of what can develop into the authentic self. We are at present powerless to make significant changes in the moral and metaphysical quality of our lives, but we have the power to try to see ourselves as we are. (22)

Inner work requires a division of attention into an object-subject relationship – one part on what is perceived (the object) and the other part on our inner world of present awareness (the subject). “If we follow our attention, we will see that either I am all object – my attention is totally directed at the object outside myself – or it is focused on me, the subject. It can move very quickly between the two, which gives the illusion of a subject-object relationship, but there is really no relationship; it is all one or the other. But it is possible to establish a real relationship so that there is an awareness of both simultaneously.” (23) With practice, the

duration of attention becomes longer and more refined. A more purified awareness slowly emerges, free from egotism.

In the Buddhist tradition, ‘mindfulness’ or ‘bare attention’ is a sustained attention directed to the contents of our mind (thoughts, images, emotions, sensations) as they occur from moment to moment during the course of daily experience. It is a calm, non-judgemental observation of what is happening in our inner and outer worlds: “Bare attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens *to* us and *in* us, at the successive moments of perception. Attention is kept to a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech or mental comment.” (24)

The study and application of attention plays a significant role in Gurdjieff’s Fourth Way teachings and practical exercises, especially the Movements. Gurdjieff taught that attention is an instrument of self-development, saying, “To perfect one’s attention is to perfect oneself.” In *This Fundamental Quest*, Henriette Lannes, a student of Gurdjieff, highlights the importance of attention in inner work: “The quality of our attention is reflected in the quality of our real knowledge of ourselves. When our attention is automatic, a prisoner of our mental, emotional and physical associations, all of the external and internal impressions we receive are fragmented. When our attention reaches a level of genuine awareness of ourselves, impressions are particularly alive and penetrating.” (25)

According to Gurdjieff, attention is indispensable for any effective inner work. Work with attention is a vehicle for awakening ‘essence’ or ‘true self’ and entering the state of self-consciousness, as well as making contact with the higher intellectual and higher emotional centers. Attention also lies at the heart of conscious presence or the sense of “I am.” The importance of attention is evident in many of the methods employed by Gurdjieff: “In moments when the attention is finely focused on self-observation; in the momentary struggles with mechanicalness and negativity. In each of these inner experiences, we may have momentary glimpses of the incredible complexity, subtlety and lawfulness of our inner psychological/spiritual world. It is *attention*, strengthened by effort and repetition that makes these experiences of the inner world possible.” (26)

One of the most important practices in Gurdjieff’s teaching, ‘self-remembering,’ is based on conscious attention. One of his maxims was “Remember yourself always and everywhere.”

Conscious, willed attention to oneself and the world is the standard by which one measures oneself in this teaching. The practice involves trying to open one’s inner life to another source of attention, starting with just being aware that you’re here – being present. At one level, this is indeed the practice of presence . . . It means being fully engaged with whatever you’re doing at a particular moment. In a sense, it’s a practice of remembering yourself at any given moment. It has to do with the essence of presence: trying to be open inwardly to another quality of the self, the real “I” or the real “I am” within. (27)

Both Pythagoras and Socrates taught the need to develop a higher quality of attention to further self-awakening. They recognized that a certain subtle energy exists within each human being which corresponds to the highest principle of the universe. Sometimes this is referred to as a “living light,” calling us to be present. But energy of a finer quality cannot enter human life without the support of conscious attention. Jacob Needleman describes this cosmic process: “The body can come alive, transforming its state, serve our deeper aims, heal itself when flooded with conscious attention. The body and mind can do, act, love with an entirely new force and joy when it is filled with conscious attention . . . Conscious attention is a force that, if only for a moment, lifts the being of whatever or whomever it touches.” (28)

With a higher degree of attention, the human functions of thinking, feeling, and sensing can be harmonized and work together. Jeanne de Salzmann, a senior student of Gurdjieff, indicates the direction of this harmonization: “When my brain is active, sensitive, alive in a state of attentive immobility, there is a movement of extraordinary quality that does not belong just to the thinking, the sensation or the emotion. It is a wholly different movement that leads to truth, to what we cannot name . . . My mind becomes quiet. I begin to see that real knowing is possible only in the moment when my attention is full, when consciousness fills everything. There is pure existence.” (29)

Only a conscious attention, through the quality of its movement of energy, can *hold together* the three essential parts of our being: thought, body and feeling. We generally believe that attention comes from only our thinking center, although there exists within us possible levels of attention coming simultaneously from our intellect, our body, and our feeling. At certain moments we see, though perhaps distantly, that this attention – freer but still insufficiently developed in us – is the key to a greater inner opening in which less heavy, finer energies come together. These energies confer life, light, and warmth in our inner world, in the service of a Great Reality in the universe, just as the Sun confers these things to the Earth. For those who seek to awaken to what they truly are, this new attention has more value than anything else in their lives. (30)

Many people experience flashes of this higher attention, often in a time of heightened emotion or in a state of wonder. Sometimes it happens within the process of self-observation or during a spiritual exercise: “There is a kind of attention that is profoundly and breathtakingly intimate, that knows and feels itself as I, *myself*, and not as the self I have been conditioned to identify with. This mind yearns to step back and exist purely and simply. The mind, the psyche, the seat of attention – this mind yearns simply to be.” (31) Such an experience can also occur in moments of heightened emotion, when our ordinary conditioned self is in abeyance:

We know from experience that there are moments in life – moments of great crisis, perhaps, of sorrow, or wonder, or even terror, or shock, or tenderness – in which a conscious attention appears within ourselves that is independent of our emotions, our thoughts and sensations. It is an attention that is pure pres-

ence. It sees what is, what is taking place within ourselves. The appearance of this conscious attention brings with it a new sense of *I am*, I exist. I exist here, I exist now . . . *Time has stopped* – or, one might say, a completely new dimension of time has appeared, the time of another dimension, a higher reality. This quality of time is an aspect of what the great teachings call *eternity* . . . Such experiences are glimpses of the Self. An identity that we have all but forgotten exists within us, waiting for us, calling to us. (32)

Transformation and Conscious Living

The primary goal of practising self-observation and working with the power of attention is real self-knowledge, which eventually leads to spiritual awakening or self-realization. But first the ego-based obstacles to a more conscious state of awareness must be reduced or overcome. The inherent challenges that face the seeker are significant. In *What is God?* Jacob Needleman relates his experience as a student of the Gurdjieff Work in America:

Merely seeing myself as I was, as my experience in the practice of self-observation showed me, was surprisingly difficult but also, paradoxically, also surprisingly simple. Looking at something in myself without trying to change it was itself a force, an energy that had an action upon what was seen. And indeed sometimes it had a transforming action upon my entire state of being. Such was the power of pure attention . . . I began to understand that self-observation was itself an instrument of change, but change of a kind one could never have imagined or expected. Change in the direction of human sensitivity, presence, being. For a moment only, and then gone. But what a precious moment! What a precious indication that it was indeed possible to cultivate another, more humanly meaningful state of being. At the same time, such self-observation had the frequent result of bringing one face-to-face with the inner helplessness which permeated one's life. (33)

When we are able to shed the ego-centered view of the world, there is a reorchestration of energies and relationships as the power of attention and choiceless awareness heralds a new, harmonious way of living. There is a complete acceptance of things as they are and a new understanding of the nature of the self. In the wise and encouraging words of Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa: “For the first time we are able to see ourselves completely, perfectly, beautifully *as what we are*, absolutely as what we are.” (34)

The fruits of self-knowledge are two-fold. There is not only an understanding of the ego or conditioned self, but also an intimation of another way of living free from the constraints of our habitual patterns of thinking, feeling and sensing. Tibetan Buddhist lama Tarthang Tulku: “The motivation for self-knowledge arises from within, as a genuine response to our deepest needs. It unfolds as an inner exploration that gains momentum as we observe our patterns, see how

they are formed, and understand how they affect the quality of our lives. Since the specific forms of our patterning are uniquely our own, only we can track them to their source.” (35)

The observation of the body and mind from an open and receptive stance is a starting point in the pursuit of self-knowledge. But there is still a subject-object relationship – there is an observer and something observed. Through persistent and patient self-observation, eventually the observer or ‘witness’ dissolves into pure awareness, transcending the duality of subject-object. What remains is pure awareness, a pristine consciousness which is unaffected by the contents of consciousness, leaving only the unconditioned, timeless joy and love of living, of being. And finally, at the end of the spiritual journey, consciousness itself dissolves into Self or Being – the Source of all that exists.

Awareness of *what is*, the reality of the moment, opens us to a higher dimension of unconditional acceptance and unmovable serenity – the timeless present. “The understanding of the totality of life brings about its own action. This totality is to be understood from moment to moment. There must be the death of the past moment, of memory. Through self-knowledge there is the realization that the whole treasure of life lies within oneself. The mind is free to be still. Only then is there the coming into being of what is beyond the measure of the mind” (36)

When we observe life with the totality of our being, perception is grounded in the present moment, *now* and *here*, and beyond time and space. Throughout the day we can remember to return to the state of pure awareness. The present moment is always available; in fact, it is inescapable. Jean Klein: “It is a great art to look at something, to look the way an innocent child looks. It is a moment out of time and space. It is this moment which leads to transformation. Only seeing things clearly can bring transformation.” (37)

As self-observation ripens and becomes a more effective instrument of self-knowledge, there is a shift in consciousness to present moment awareness. By withdrawing attention from the pull of the past and the future during the course of daily life, our experience of the time dimension shifts to the timeless present. The pattern of resistance to *now* is broken. Eckhart Tolle:

Through self-observation, more *presence* comes into your life automatically. The moment you realize 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 the mind: witnessing presence. Be present as the watcher of your mind – of your thoughts and emotions as well as your reactions in various situations. Notice how often your attention is in the past or future. 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. (38)

As we gain self-knowledge through impartial self-observation, there is a perceptible change in the quality of our consciousness. By being aware of our subjective reactions to the various challenges of life, we open to a more conscious and panoramic moment-to-moment awareness. Real transformation takes place when we understand the conditioned nature of the ego from moment to moment. The mind becomes fresh and innocent, grounded in the present and open to the unknown, the mystery of existence.

Truth cannot be given to you by somebody. You have to discover it; and to discover, there must be a state of mind in which there is direct perception. Understanding comes through being aware of what *is*. To know exactly what *is*, the real, the actual, without interpreting it, without condemning or justifying it, is the beginning of wisdom. It is only when we begin to interpret, to translate according to our conditioning, to our prejudice, that we miss the truth . . . To acknowledge, to be aware of that which *is*, puts an end to struggle. To acknowledge, to be aware of what one is, is already the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of understanding, which releases you from time. (39)

As impartial observation becomes a central fixture in one's life, there is a visible reduction in reactive judgement, comparison and evaluation. This allows for a real transformation of being to occur in which one lives in the moment itself, free from the automatism of the ego. When the bonds of conditioning are broken, there is a feeling of expansion and openness and we begin to live conscious lives of intelligence and sensitivity. Jean Klein: "In choiceless living the situation is given the freedom to unfold. When you understand something and live it without being stuck to conditioned belief, what you have understood dissolves in your openness. In this silent presence change takes place of its own accord, the problem is dissolved and duality ends. You are left in your glory." (40)

Act in daily life according to your understanding. This is very important. Take note afterwards whether you have acted in a mechanical way. After you have noticed several times that you have reacted in a certain way, you will begin to catch yourself in the middle of the reaction and a time will come, you can be sure, when you are alert before you react. So don't qualify your doing or condemn yourself. It's enough just to see it. When you've seen it you have taken the charcoal out of the fire. You have removed the fixed energy that holds your pattern. In simply being alert and welcoming, you are already living in your fullness. (41)

The first-hand investigation conducted by impartial self-observation reveals the truth about ourselves as the actual workings of our body and mind are clearly identified in the light of conscious attention. There is a perceptible movement or transition away from identification with the contents and activity of the body-mind to a state of non-judgemental awareness. There is a deep transformation in the quality of our consciousness. The ability to be aware

of what, why and how we are thinking, feeling, sensing and acting from moment to moment throughout the day is the foundation of intelligence, happiness and inner peace.

Wisdom grows out of self-knowledge and reflects itself in all aspects of daily life as a re-orientation of our basic understanding and expression of our true self. In *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield write: "In deep stillness, we can come to that which goes beyond our limited sense of self, that which is silent and timeless and universal. Wisdom is not one particular experience, nor a series of ideas and knowledge to be collected. It is an ongoing process of discovery that unfolds when we live with balance and full awareness in each moment. It grows out of our sincerity and genuine openness, and it can lead us to a whole new world of freedom." (42)

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