

From *Noetic Sciences Review*, 1993, No. 26, Summer, 7-8.

Getting Beyond Observer Bias

In science, an instrument used to help make something more apparent does so by blocking out something else. The same dichotomy applies in psychological observation. However, whenever we use our mental faculties, it usually doesn't occur to us that we're using an instrument that has limitations as well as advantages. We tend to take for granted our minds and what they can perceive. Only after an extended and committed apprenticeship in spiritual practice does the meditator begin to realize that the mind is not simply an objective observer of things - It is a biased observer. This is new territory in Western science and philosophy; there are many questions facing the aspirant inner empiricist

What can we do to minimize or eliminate observer bias? Are some techniques or traditions better equipped to train us as inner empiricists? Do differences between various spiritual disciplines reflect optional techniques for dealing with observer bias? Perhaps different spiritual disciplines work best within different cultures? A particular spiritual path may be more suited to one type of mind in one culture than some alternative - even though most spiritual practices may lead, ultimately, toward the one truth.

A complete methodology for inner empiricism would include a model for evaluating different spiritual traditions. It would take into account the culture, geographical location, historical period, kinds of people involved, psychological makeup, education and level of understanding. Such a model would allow us to recognize differences between various spiritual systems without forcing them into any fundamental disagreement. We need to ask "Are there paths most suited to modern Western minds?"

It is possible that Eastern religions - at least as taught by Eastern teachers - are not as appropriate to our culture and our times as, say, the teachings of Gurdjieff. It is not a question of which is better, more true or false, but what is more skillful. The evaluation would operate on two levels - cultural and individual. We should inquire: "Is this discipline appropriate for this particular culture?" and then "Is it appropriate for the level of understanding and spiritual development of this particular individual?"

Tools for Inner Observation

Next, we need to ask "What tools can we use to discriminate one school from another? How can we cultivate such tools? How do we know when we see the truth? Is inner observation sufficient to provide this knowledge or do we need some other criteria for assessment?" Clearly, introspection is unlikely to be our sole guide, since inner appearances can be deceptive, too.

As it happens, there is something unique to modern Western culture which may aid our efforts at meditating and gaining interior knowledge: We have computers and knowledge of physiology. Sophisticated biofeedback technology, for instance, can provide objective measurement of physiological activity, and we can correlate these results with subjective observations. Perhaps a combination of subjective report and external measurement would result in more reliable observations?

Whether or not we make use of Western technology and science to aid inner evaluation, we still need to distinguish between introspection and observation. Introspection is a form of thought process that tends to involve assessment and judgment. One aim of meditation, however, is to observe without judging, without analyzing, without explaining, without getting distracted by our thoughts. As inner empiricists, we are looking for a way to develop pure observation without thought, while still needing to observe thought. At that point, we can begin to distinguish a kind of awareness that is not the same as thinking. This is where the real value of inner empiricism lies. But it is still just the beginning of the journey. Spiritual teachers of all times and disciplines have warned against the danger of slipping from awareness into thinking about awareness. Like the scientific search for truth, the spiritual quest is a life-long path, without any guarantees.

-Charles Tart

file: c:\jarticle\bias