



THE INNER OBSERVER



Helen Palmer

Self-observation is a basic inner life practice that appears in all wisdom traditions. Also known as Witnessing Consciousness, the practice consists of focusing your attention inwardly and becoming aware of the thought and other "objects of attention" that arise within. There are several ways to approach this practice, but the initial experience is always one of recognizing your automatic pattern, and the tenacity with which certain preoccupations recur within your mind. The fact that you can observe and talk about your habits of thought and feeling from the perspective of a detached outsider helps to make these patterns less compulsive. Thoughts begin to seem "separate from myself" rather than "who I really am".

If you continue to observe thoughts and feelings, your own preoccupations begin to feel alien and slightly irritating. When attention is grounded in a stance of an inner observer, thoughts start to seem like "what I think" rather than "my real self". The reason is that there is a part of your own awareness that remains detached enough to watch the flow of thoughts go by. When attention is organized into a separate observing self, you are in position to be objective about who you really are. And with practice, the observer, rather than any particular thoughts or feelings that you have, begins to seem like the Self. Of course, when your attention shifts back to thinking again the sense of your identity as a separate awareness will dissolve and you are likely to lose all objectivity and go "on automatic" again.

In a way, all successful psychotherapy depends upon the ability to detach attention from pervasive habits and to describe them from a perspective of a neutral outsider. Accurate self-observation is vital to being able to recognize your own personality type, because you will need to know your own habits of heart and mind in order to recognize yourself from the stories of your "similars". The function of the Inner Observer is therefore critical to cultivating self-observation.

The capacity to turn inward and witness the mechanics of our own mind as it unfolds is a defining human endowment. It demonstrates the reality of the type structure because I can watch the categories of structure occur and recede. Cultivating the capacity of the Inner Observer is foundational to recognizing personality type.

The Inner Observer is experienced as an aspect of awareness separate from the categories of type. Its distinguishing faculties are 1) it is permanent; 2) it never becomes conditioned; 3) it is benign; it has no opinion as it functions to witness without opinion; 4) it can distinguish between the object of attention flowing through that inner space as well as appear and disappear; 5) it unifies and disengages from an object of attention. Indeed the Inner Observer can become inseparable and at one with the object of attention or separate from it.

See Palmer, The Enneagram: Understanding Yourself and the Others in Your Life. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988. pp. 4-9, 12-15.