

The Undefended Self

By Susan Thesenga

CHAPTER 3

Developing the Observer Self

“There is a real self that equals neither your negative aspects, nor your adamant self-judgment, nor the pretense that covers up the negativity. To find this real self is our concern.”

Pathwork Guide Lecture 189
“Self Identification Determined through Stages of Consciousness”

James Expanding: the Microscope and the First Aid Kit

At age 50, James knew who he was. Or thought he did. He had struggled out of a narrow, lower-class upbringing to finish college and graduate school, and had worked to establish a culturally sophisticated and financially successful life. He had outgrown an early, immature marriage to a dependent and controlling woman, leaving her to raise their two sons.

As a child James had taken seriously his family's rigid Catholicism, even becoming a devoted altar boy. He could never understand the other boys' jokes about missing mass or using the Lord's name in vain. For James the possibility of eternal damnation for committing such sins was a very serious threat. In adolescence James was gripped in a vicelike contradiction between his powerful emergent sexuality and the prohibitions of the Church. At the same time his mind was challenging the superstitions of his religion. He eventually rejected Catholicism and became an adamant atheist.

However, he never stopped searching for answers to the ultimate questions about the meaning of life and death. In his late twenties James had discovered Eastern mystical religions with their mind-stopping answers to the questions he still had. James then began a committed practice of Zen Buddhism and, after many years of meditation, had a powerful enlightenment experience in which his ego-bound sense of separateness dissolved into the state of unitive consciousness, God-realization. Since that time, he was rarely anxious and had lost all fear of death. In his thirties James had found the Pathwork and had done considerable work on trying to bring his personality more into alignment with his spiritual awakening.

But lately James had been feeling bored with his life. While enjoying his competence, independence, and intellectual maturity, he felt he had achieved all his worldly goals. His spiritual knowledge felt secure, and he rarely felt personal distress. Reasonably content with his life and

relationships, James had been semi-consciously praying for something to shake him up and get him fully engaged with his path of spiritual growth again.

Then his twenty-five-year-old son Matthew arrived for a visit. James had seen Matthew only rarely since he had left his wife many years ago. Father and son had never been close. Although he was fond of Matthew, James had never felt deeply loving towards this gentle boy, who had been a physically fragile child and had never been aggressive or successful enough to please his father. James's ambivalence toward his son also contained a strong dose of guilt about his own inadequacy as a father.

Shortly after his arrival, Matthew told his father that he was gay and had AIDS, a disease that would likely kill him within the year. Reacting with shock and emotional numbness, James tried to observe in himself the feelings he expected to have in the wake of Matthew's tragic news. But all he could sense was a cold, hard place around his heart which shut out all feeling.

James encouraged his son to talk, and over the next week Matthew cautiously began to open up, first describing his anxiety toward his father and the resentment he had felt when James left the family. He described how his sense of feeling trapped and restricted while growing up with his mother had resumed now that he had recently returned to live with her. Matthew admitted his terror of death, saying that his own rejection of Catholicism had not been replaced by any other spiritual perspective. He confessed that his gay sexual life had mostly been frantic and unhappy, furtive and unfulfilling, until the previous year when he had met and briefly settled in with a man whom he loved deeply. But when Matthew was diagnosed with AIDS, the relationship had crumbled under the strain and he had returned to live with his mother.

James listened through all of this with very little reaction, the chill around his heart solidifying into a wintry numbness. While he wished his son well and felt no judgement about Matthew's homosexuality, James could find nothing reassuring to say to his son about death; he could not articulate any words of comfort. His voice seemed lost deep inside an icy well. When Matthew left a week later to return to his mother's care, the only feeling James could find were twinges of old guilt about his poor fathering.

Then the nightmares began. James awoke several nights in a row trembling and sweating. In one dream: "I am surrounded by nuns or maybe witches, terrifying oversized women, dressed all in black, cackling and pointing accusing fingers at me. I am sure I am about to be killed for some heinous crime. As they start to come toward me, I magically find in my hand a microscope. When I look through the microscope, the whole dream scene changes and I am now viewing myself and the oversized women from a long way away, through the microscope, observing them the way a scientist might, calmly studying some natural phenomenon."

In another dream: "I am stranded alone on a cold, dark field where I will have to spend the night. I somehow know there are vampires here, who might come and suck my blood. I wish for a friend with a first aid kit."

After several weeks of nightmares, James returned to regular Pathwork sessions, hoping to find the tools that his dreams suggested might help him. His helper urged him to keep a daily journal, recording all his dreams and feelings. As James worked on his dreams he understood that the microscope in his first dream represented the tool of the objective scientist in him, which had helped him from being overwhelmed by the threatening dream women. In the second nightmare James had hoped for a compassionate friend to bring "the first aid kit", which would help him to heal himself. It was clear to both James and his helper that deep, ancient feelings were now needing to surface. They both knew

James needed the clarity of the scientist with a microscope and the compassion of a friend with a first aid kit to see and record what was happening to him, without judgement and without fear. With the help of his observer self, James could welcome the growing unconscious turmoil as signalling a new phase of his spiritual work. He soon had a dream about the state of his “inner house”:

“I am in a falling-down house. Coming down the steps, I see curtains fall to the ground, and then part of the steps collapses. A young guy laughs. The owner of the house says, ‘It’s rough. You don’t know how I struggled to put this place together. For years I’ve been buying and selling small pieces of real estate, knowing that out of each transaction I’d only make a little profit. I kept putting aside the profits to buy this place, and now it’s falling apart. I’ll never get as much for it as it is really worth.’

“I go out with the owner of this falling-down house and several of his friends. We go through city streets with lots of twists and turns, and I comment on what a hard journey this is. We arrive at a bar, and I order a Bud, but the bartender laughs and says, ‘That’s the one thing you won’t get here.’ I say, ‘Give me whatever you’ve got.’ The bartender leers, leans over toward me, and replies, ‘I’ve got lots of other things I could give you.’ Feeling ill at ease, I leave the bar alone to wander through deserted streets, feeling completely lost.”

In the ensuing months James uncovered his fear that the careful ego structure he had crafted by considerable hard work over many years was, like the house of his dream, in danger of falling down and becoming worthless. Letting go of some of his ego defenses meant allowing himself to feel temporarily lost. Behind his fear of the homosexual bartender, he discovered his longing for a “Bud,” or brotherly friend. A lifelong competitiveness with men began to relax into a desire for real masculine closeness.

James also found the little boy in him who grew up feeling overpowered by his moralistic mother and by the nuns who surrounded him during his twelve years at Catholic schools. Growing up, James had been terrified of threats of hell and damnation for his sexual impulses. Even now, unconsciously, James feared that his sexuality condemned him to being “bad blood”. The vampire threat in his dream arose from this ancient terror, and was related to his unconscious fear that his son’s AIDS was a punishment for sexuality.

James felt his rage at the abusive power these Catholic women had wielded over him, and then he reviewed his years of unconscious revenge, his own vampire which had inflicted retributive emotional cruelty on the women he had been close to. Now he felt a real, adult guilt for having closed his heart to women for fear of being hurt or controlled by them.

He reviewed his relationships with men and realised he had pushed away many who had reached out to him in friendship. James felt within him the little boy frightened of his father – a big, athletic man who constantly ridiculed James’s sensitivity. Still painful were the memories of going dove hunting with his father and being told to go fetch the fallen birds. He wept remembering the sight of a particularly pathetic dying dove, its wounded breast heaving its last breaths, and he, the obedient bird-dog son, an accomplice to its killing. He had finally refused to go hunting with his father and adopted a mask of contempt and superiority toward his father and his sports. But now James felt the pain of his estrangement from his father, and in his anguish he found an opening to feeling the pain of his own rejection of his sensitive son Matthew.

James’s life was certainly not boring now. His inner life was very full as he opened up the vast hidden rooms of his emotional being. He had another dream about his inner house: “I am in a room of the crumbling house of the earlier dream, but I know there is a larger room behind this one, a room that is in good shape. A different kind of business is going on in that room; there are lots of men, of all ages

and descriptions, talking about making a movie together, and they want me to be in it. I wonder if I will.”

The dream helped him see that, behind the crumbling old rigid structure of his mask, there was a room in good shape which contained a large “cast of characters” in his psychic house, and he was being invited to join the inner drama being enacted there.

In his dreams and in his personal work James was opening up to many previously hidden aspects – his fear of and longing for closeness with a man, his childhood sexual terrors, and his real adult guilt. He was entering unknown territory that felt more feminine and vulnerable than the familiar masculine stoic strength he had known.

He dreamed, “I am outside the door to my sister’s house. I have only been to her house a few times and, even then, I have never been inside. But this time, in the dream, she invites me in and I enter it with a kind of sacredness, as if entering a church.”

Here is the new room of James’s inner house, the room of his previously denied feminine nature, now at last letting itself be known to him. Soon after this spiritual entrance, he dreamed:

“I am on my way to an ancient sacred site in South America. On the airplane a woman comes to me, saying she is the first Peruvian Native stewardess. I feel awkward with her, not knowing what to say. Yet I have a sense that this journey has been made to meet her.” A central purpose of James’s recent unconscious turmoil was now revealed: he was journeying to meet his buried native feminine nature.

In his Pathwork sessions he continued to explore new feelings and meet many sub-personalities that had chafed under the rule of his rigid limiting ego mask. Through this kaleidoscopic experience of change, James always kept intact a part of himself which could ride any wave, allow any feeling, admit any unconscious information. This part was his observer self, a spiritual anchor in the choppy seas of growth. His emotional life, which seemed frozen just a few months ago, had fully thawed.

Integrating more of his previously hidden nature soon afforded James a new capacity for sharing feelings with his son. Toward the end of Matthew’s life, James was able to cry with him, admit his regrets about his fathering, and thank his son for being in his life. Staying close to Matthew’s hospital bed during his last few days, James was able, for the first time, to stroke and comfort Matthew, talking softly to his son whom he had known so little. The tragic, early death of this gentle homosexual young man helped his father reclaim his own gentleness and moved James towards wholeness.

Developing the Observer Self

Every human being is, in reality, many beings. Like James, we each exist simultaneously at many levels of consciousness. While this is confusing, it also helps us to make sense of the many apparent contradictions that coexist within us. The adult James wanted to feel compassion for his son. But James’s own inner child was still paralysed by residual fear of being ridiculed for his emotional sensitivity. James’s spiritual self knew that death was an illusion, but his frozen grief and fear for his son made him unable to express what another part of him knew so well. His masculine ego self had struggled and coped and built a strong sense of himself; his feminine feeling self was breaking down the rigidity of that structure to allow the waters of his unconscious to flow more freely. Our many inner selves contradict our limited idea of who we are, and the different levels often contradict one another.

This inner complexity can be likened to having a “cast of characters” within us, each with its own beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. Each character lives in a separate room of our psychic house,

inhabiting a different reality. Or we might say that each of these levels of consciousness exists at a different frequency, available as different channels on a radio dial. When we are tuned into one station we may be unaware that an entirely different frequency is available with a brief switch of the inner dial.

In becoming acquainted with our inner cast of characters, or inner psychic frequencies, we especially need to accept the apparently undesirable ones, including the scared, sensitive child and the hostile, vengeful adult. These characters live in hiding, as our shadow-self, which can be repressed but never eliminated.

While we may understand that diverse and contradictory levels of consciousness coexist in us, we often do not perceive that each one of them is innately creative. Our lives are a manifestation of the sum total of all the different characters or levels of consciousness that we are, whether or not we are aware of them. Bringing the inner worlds of our personal cast of characters into awareness allows us to understand how we create our lives.

The Observer Self

How do we begin the inner journey of self-transformation? If we are to meet our wounded child and release our negative ego, discard our mask and transform our lower self, who does the work? Which self works on these other selves?

The parts of ourselves that are already developed take on the task of welcoming into consciousness and transforming the other parts. The mature parts of ourselves become the “helpers” to the undeveloped parts. All our helping selves guide us on our evolutionary journey toward maturity and wholeness. We do need the help of outer teachers, healers, therapists, and guides, but we must remember that the goal is to awaken the inner teacher/healer who is ever-present and ready to guide us.

Even if we do not feel mature, and even if we cannot contact the inner teacher, anyone can, with practice, develop an observer self. The observer self is made up of the tools which James discovered in the course of his work on himself – objectivity and detachment (the microscope of the scientist) along with love and compassion (the first-aid kit of the friend) toward our many other selves. The observer stands “outside”, as it were, of our selves and our lives, and notes what is experienced. This stance is a place we can plant ourselves psychically and from which we can view all the rest of our lives. It is a place we can identify with while we are learning to notice and name other parts of the self. **The ability to observe ourselves objectively and compassionately is the single most important skill to develop in walking the spiritual path.**

The objective observer is a positive ego function. It is an aspect of the higher self that we can experience in ordinary ego reality. It is a benign witness to our inner processes and outer events. It simply notes, without judgment, whatever comes to the surface of our awareness. It welcomes especially those messages from the unconscious which bring us potentially new information about ourselves. It does not discriminate between the “good” and the “bad” that emerge from within; it welcomes all to awareness.

Laura was moving from a city life as a dancer and dance teacher, in which she maintained a polished professional image, to a simpler life in the country with her new husband. She had the following dream:

“I come out of a Pathwork session to the parking lot where three vehicles are parked, all of which I know are mine. One is a slick white Cadillac, one is a black Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and one is a little red pick-up truck. All the stuff I own is in these three vehicles. Several masked robbers are

trying to steal my belongings from the vehicles and I start yelling at them. 'You can't take that; it's mine.' I know some of the stuff isn't worth anything; in fact, it's stuff I would probably throw away when I get home. But I don't want them to have it; I know it's mine and I'm determined to claim it. Eventually I yell at them enough to get them to stop stealing, and they leave. I feel triumphant at having claimed it all as mine."

Laura felt that the three vehicles represented aspects of herself. The white Cadillac was her mask as a professional dancer: sleek and fancy. The motorcycle was her idea of her negative lower self: exciting but dangerous. And the little red pick-up truck was her higher self leading her now to a life in the country. She was following her heart rather than her idealised self-image. She felt the masked robbers were the defensive (mask) part of her that wanted to deny other aspects of her identity. And she felt wonderful at having insisted that all three vehicles and their contents were hers. The dream solidified her claim to all of herself – the mask, lower self, and higher self. The dream also incorporates where she had been and where she was going. In the Plains Indian medicine wheel symbolism, white is the colour for the north, for letting go and for death (of her old life) and red is the colour for the east, for birth and new beginnings.

The Laura in the dream, who claims all three cars, is the self which can identify other aspects without becoming identified **with** any one of them. This observer self may also be called the "fair witness", who sees and records all without distortion. The observer sits at the edge of the vast terrain of our inner selves, paying attention to whatever comes up.

We might visualise the immensity of self by seeing ourselves as a container in which aspects of universal consciousness "float around," as it were, expressing themselves now through me, and then through you, and then through someone else. Such a visualisation can help us detach a little from the particular contents of our own personal container of consciousness.

Every trait familiar to human understanding, every attitude known in creation, every aspect of personality, is one of the many manifestations of consciousness. Every one of them that is not yet integrated into the whole needs to be unified, synthesized, made part of the harmonious whole . . . can you imagine for a moment that many traits familiar to you, which you have always associated with the person, as existing only **through** a person, are not the person *per se*, but are actually in themselves free-floating particles of the overall consciousness, whether these be good or evil traits? Take love or malice, perseverance or sloth. They are all free-floating particles of the overall consciousness which need to be incorporated into the manifesting personality. Only then does purification, harmonisation, and enrichment of the manifesting consciousness take place which create the evolutionary process of unifying the separated particles of consciousness.
(PGL 189).

This understanding of ourselves as "containers" of many diverse particles of consciousness, some of which are superficial or negative or destructive, will especially help us in learning to view ourselves with greater compassion and greater detachment.

We can learn to shift our identity away from all the floating fragments of consciousness and toward the one who observes them all. This is comparable to identifying with being in the audience as we watch the whole cast of characters come onto our inner stage. Or, in another metaphor, we become the owner of the house who opens the doors of the separate rooms where the inner characters dwell.

Negative and unproductive attitudes towards the self always come from a wrong belief that we are only some limited or negative part of ourselves rather than the whole of who we are. The bridge to knowing our inner wholeness is the observer self, that part of ourselves which accepts **whatever** is within us. As we learn to identify with the observer self, we develop self-acceptance. Total self-acceptance is the most curative habit we can develop on the spiritual path.

Distortions in Self-Observation

When we first start observing ourselves, we tend to make dualistic judgments about what we see – judging our selves and our attributes as either good or bad, weak or strong, silly or profound. Yet the moment we judge ourselves, we are not observing any more, we are judging. The process of observation then needs to shift back “behind” the judge, so we can calmly observe the self-judgment. If we find ourselves becoming hopeless about what we observe, then we “step back” and observe the hopelessness.

Our attitude is often one of alarm or disapproval or even despair when we discover ourselves acting or feeling in ways that do not conform to our idealised self image. But we cannot change behaviour stemming from our undeveloped selves until the behaviour and the underlying attitudes are brought into consciousness. Self-condemnation throws us back into denial of our negativity where it can never be transformed.

Source of Our Distortions in Self-Observation

More often than not, our negative judgements of what we see in ourselves are the internalised voices of parents or early authority figures, or of rigid cultural and religious codes of conduct. These judgments are not the true self-observer, but come from the idealised self image that has embodied unrealistic standards of perfectionism against which we constantly measure ourselves. The first step in true self-observation is, therefore, to observe this perfectionism in ourselves. Whenever we lapse into harsh self judgment, we need to step back and compassionately observe this process as well.

Martha was moving into a new apartment. She picked up some boxes at work for packing, and decided to take along the small Styrofoam “peanuts” in the boxes in case she wanted to pack something fragile. When she got home, however, she realised that she didn’t need all the Styrofoam; it just cluttered up the available packing space, and now she would have to discard it.

At this point, however, she got terribly depressed and could hardly go on packing at all. When she tuned into herself, she became aware of an inner voice accusing her: “You’re so stupid! How could you possibly have thought that Styrofoam would be useful? What a stupid thought.” The strength of this self-condemnation struck Martha as absurd and comical, even as she suffered its real painfulness.

As she stopped to listen to this debilitating self-criticism, she realised it sounded like the voice of her mother, who had constantly criticized her as a child. Martha had internalised her mother’s voice and was using it now to destroy her own self-esteem. Even though she could not immediately alter this inner self-destructiveness, she did manage to step back from her critical judge, into the real self-observer, who simply noted what was going on within her: the old drama of the critical mother and hurt child playing itself out again.

She then started a dialogue between that mother and child; the latter voice felt victimized while the first voice felt “on top”. Suddenly the victim part of Martha asserted herself and said that she would not sit still for this self-abuse any longer; she stood up to the critic, who then backed down. Martha immediately felt better and could resume her packing. Her objective observer self had facilitated this healing through acting as a benign and detached helper to Martha as she worked with her different inner characters.

The voices of perfectionism, self-doubt, and self-denigration are most often negative parental voices that we have internalised. Gestalt theory calls this the voice of the “top dog” which is always critical of the “underdog”; other therapies call this the voice of the parent who is critical of the “child” self. The demand for perfectionism by the internalised judge makes even the simplest, most innocent mistakes into catastrophes for our self-esteem.

Martha pursued her critical voice further in a Pathwork session and learned the secret to its perpetuation: the belief that “if it hurts, it must be true”. She accorded more credibility to her self-critical voices than she did to any self-praising ones.

As she looked at this still more deeply, she realised how much as a child she had craved her mother’s approval, believing that she would be o.k. only if she could live up to her mother’s perfectionistic standards. Until that time, however, she must suffer being unloved by her mother. It was difficult to accept that in reality she would never be loved by her mother in the way she had wanted, and that the lack of acceptance of her was actually her mother’s problem. Her need for acceptance was real, even if unfulfilled. The truth was that her mother had been an imperfect parent; she an imperfect child.

Martha had to let go of the illusion that she was the bad one and her mother was the good or perfect one, whose love Martha could earn by someday being as perfect as her mother demanded. She had to accept that she had not been loved well, had not been accepted for who she was, and that it was not her fault. It simply happened that way.

She sobbed harshly with the grief of giving up the illusion that she might someday be loved by her mother, if only she were perfect. And then, more gently, she cried with the pain of the lonely little girl within her whom she had been beating up on so often in her thoughts. Martha visualised her higher self as the good mother, “re-parenting” her little girl, holding her and reassuring her, loving her unconditionally, allowing her to make mistakes.

We need to be able to identify the negative self-critical voices, but learn not to identify **with** them; they are merely part of our inner landscape, no more “true” than any other part of ourselves.

Many of us have misconceptions about self-awareness, such as “if it hurts, it must be true”, or, equally false, “if it hurts, it can’t be true.” In truth, awareness, especially awareness of the lower self, can be painful. However, such pain, simply felt, is both temporary and cleansing. And awareness, especially of the higher self and of unified states of being, can be deeply pleasurable. Behind the temporary feelings of pain or pleasure, which pass through us, awareness simply is, an empty container for all life experience.

Radical Self-Acceptance

Twenty years ago I was given a dramatic example of the stance of benign self-observation. When I was newly a member of the Pathwork community, going to Guide lectures given by Eva Pierrakos in New York City, a woman I’ll call Penny, whose leg had been amputated because of cancer, also attended the lectures. Some months later, as Penny was facing a terminal diagnosis from her cancer,

Eva asked Penny how she felt about her impending death. “Is it o.k. to die, Penny, or not o.k.?” Penny responded simply, “It isn’t o.k. or not o.k., Eva, it just is.” That “just is-ness” of death has been a model for me of radical self-acceptance for whatever is observed within the self at any time.

I believe the Pathwork teachings can do for our understanding of negativity and evil what other, recently popular spiritual teachings have done for our acceptance of death. Evil, like death, just is. At the dualistic level at which we live most of the time, both benign and evil energies live within us. But we deny our negativity even more vociferously than we deny our death. We cannot ultimately believe we will not die. But we can perpetuate the illusion that we do not contain evil. Yet to live in this illusion is as detrimental to our spiritual health as to deny our mortality. We can safely learn to allow awareness of the negative and evil aspects of ourselves with dignified self-acceptance.

Nothing within us is ultimately unacceptable. It just is, whatever it is. The most important work we do on ourselves is to align our attitude with honest and compassionate self-observation.

How different your attitude to yourself must be when you realise that it is the task of human entities to carry negative aspects with them for the purpose of integrating and synthesizing them! This affords truthfulness without hopelessness. What a dignity it lends to you when you consider that you undertake an important task for the sake of evolution. When you come into this life, you specifically bring negative aspects with you for the purpose of transformation... every human being fulfils an immense task within the universal scale of evolution (*PGL 189*).

Impatience and demands on the self to change are always counter-productive. Self-judgement creates an attitude of rebellion against a harsh super-ego. If, however, we see clearly (without self-deception) and compassionately (without self-indulgence), then we can choose to change negative aspects. We are much more likely to want to change if we can simply and benignly assess who and what we are expressing at any moment, knowing that this is not all of who we are.

If you attempt growth rather than perfection, you will live in the now. You will dispense with superimposed values, and find your own. You will dispense with subtle pretenses and superimpositions. This leads to selfhood and away from self-alienation. All this will bring you to a state of identifying with your real self, being anchored in your real self, rather than on peripheral layers (*PGL 97*).

Two Aspects of the Observer Self: Truth and Love

The practice of honest self-observation will teach us about **truth** and **love**: we learn **total honesty with the self** combined with **total acceptance of the self**.

Learning to be honest with ourselves, not to flinch from anything we see in our hidden thought and feelings as well as in our behaviour, is the same as learning to live in truth with ourselves. In strengthening our ability to be in truth with ourselves, we also strengthen our capacity to be truthful with others and to stand by the truth of issues in the world.

Learning to accept ourselves, to forgive and have compassion for every hidden thought and feeling, and every action, no matter how apparently unacceptable, is the same as learning to live in love. In strengthening our capacity to accept and forgive ourselves, to not reject, judge, or compare ourselves to others, we also strengthen our ability to love others. We can learn to love others unconditionally, without blindness, indulgence, or dependency, only when we can first learn to love ourselves.

Learning the universal values of **love** and **truth** must begin by practicing the attitudes of absolute truthfulness and unconditional acceptance toward ourselves. As we learn to identify with the observer self, rather than with any particular piece of distorted thinking or feeling, we can learn to welcome everything that comes to us in life as part of our spiritual growth.

Truth: Constructive Attitudes

Being truthful with the self means welcoming unconscious material into consciousness even if this material comes in the form of frightening dreams, negative thoughts, or unpleasant feelings. Every act of bringing unconscious or only dimly conscious material into the full light of awareness furthers the evolution of consciousness, the movement from ignorance to awareness, from limitation to wholeness, from disunity to unity.

Unconscious negative emotions and unconscious limited thinking are powerful creative forces in the universe. On the personal level, our own unexamined prejudices toward the opposite sex undermine our conscious efforts to establish an intimate relationship with a mate. On the social level, our unexamined or rationalised prejudices toward people of different colour, culture, or religion continue to create negative relationships among people. As long as this negativity is rationalised or denied, then its results are created unconsciously. And then we are surprised by the results, e.g. a failed marriage or a world at war. These negative results can only be prevented if the negativity is allowed to become conscious.

At first this may seem scary. The uncovering of previously unacknowledged negative thoughts and feelings, and the awareness that this negativity does indeed produce our undesirable life experience, often creates an initial recoiling from the process and a desire to repress the material. However, repression makes impossible the connection of cause and effect which is essential to the growth of self-responsibility and spiritual consciousness. Awareness is always a more desirable state than ignorance, even if the content of awareness is not always pleasant. Reality is preferable to illusion, however temporarily painful our reality may seem.

We gradually learn to distinguish between truthful self-observation, including moral discernment about ourselves, and harsh or punitive self-criticism. The latter always feels bad, provoking unnecessary, false, and mind-clouding guilt, whereas truth, even painful truth, feels clarifying.

Love: Constructive Attitudes

In developing genuine self-acceptance, we need first to confront certain common attitudes masquerading as love. Self-indulgence, denial, or rationalisation are not real love; they only keep us from unpleasant truths. We falsely believe that by not looking at the lower self we are being kind to ourselves (or others), emphasising the positive, or building self-esteem. While we do need to be careful about the right timing in confronting our (and others') negativity, to deny or rationalise it does not come from love. It comes from fear of the lower self.

Denial of our negativity only feeds this fear of ourselves and hence undermines self-esteem. We deny or rationalise our lower self out of fear that this is all we are. In each of us is a rock-bottom fear that we are, in essence, bad or hopeless or unlovable. And we fear that seeing our despair or our badness will bring about our annihilation. This deepest illusion of the human personality must be faced. As we face our negativity and realise that it is not all of who we really are, the apparent need to deny or indulge through avoidance will also gradually dissolve.

The way out of our fear of ourselves is the gradual recognition that we are not any of our inner “characters”, including the mask and the lower self. We gradually shift our identification away from the observed aspects of self and toward the observer who identifies these aspects. We become the mapper, not the mapped. We become awareness, not that of which we are aware.

To become a loving self-observer is comparable to becoming a good parent to ourselves. Slowly we learn to give unconditional love to ourselves, especially to the parts of ourselves that are childish, weak, or immature. The good parent reflects back the child’s strengths and helps her to develop areas that are weak. The good parent accepts the child in her entirely, including her negative feelings, even as the parent also puts limits on the child’s acting-out of her negativity and helps her learn appropriate self-expression. The parent teaches that the negativity is not her essential nature, without also denying or colluding with these aspects. Our negative aspects can be seen as immature children within us that need our attention and love in order to “grow up” into mature self-expression.

I believe that when we can love all of our selves we will fulfill the promise offered in the 23rd Psalm: “Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me.” The “thou” of the psalmist is a being of unconditional love who can be present with us even as we face fear, death, and evil. This “thou”, while it may signify God or Christ or any angelic being perceived as outside the self, can also be experienced within the self. We can perceive this presence as our own higher self, the companion of our soul, the inner God-self. When we offer this spiritual companionship to ourselves, we can face anything.

When we give gentle acceptance and love to our own immature aspects, we give them what they most need to grow. “We have been waiting all our lives to hear the words ‘I love you’ spoken by our own voice.”¹ When we practice love rather than denial we give ourselves room to expand. We create a spacious bowl of acceptance for whatever we experience in ourselves. Then our negative or painful or undesirable aspects do not need to go into hiding. Away from the light of our love, they fester unseen. When we direct the light of love and truth toward them, they can grow.

In developing positive attitudes of truthfulness and self-acceptance, we build a bridge to the greater self within us. The objective observer starts out as an ego function, as we discipline a part of ourselves to stand outside and watch ourselves. However, as our capacity to be both truthful and loving with ourselves matures, we become more and more identified with that truthful, loving self which is our personal expression of these divine forces in the universe. We come to know ourselves as our higher self, who observes and transforms all else that we are.

To the extent the conscious self uses its already existing knowledge of truth, its already existing power to execute its good will, its already existing capacity to . . . choose the attitude to the problem, to that exact degree the consciousness expands and becomes increasingly more infiltrated by the spiritual consciousness. The spiritual consciousness cannot manifest when the already existing consciousness is not fully put to use in the process of self-observation. (*PGL 189*)

¹ Quoted from Stephen Levine’s book, *Healing into Life and Death*, Doubleday, 1987.

Through the act of acknowledgment of some heretofore disowned aspect of the self, a subtle but distinct shift in identification occurs. Before such acknowledgement, you were blind to the destructive aspects, which indicated that you believed them to be you. Hence you could not afford to acknowledge them . . . but the moment you acknowledge the heretofore unacceptable, you cease to be the unacceptable, and instead you are identified with that in you that is capable of the acknowledgment . . . it is a totally different situation when you are identified with the ugly traits or when you identify them. The moment you identify them, you cease being identified with them. This is why it is so liberating to acknowledge the worst in the personality, after having battled the ever-present resistance to do so. . . the moment you identify the destructive aspects, name them, state them, articulate them, observe them; it is that which identifies, names, states, articulates, and observes that is the self with which you can truly and safely and realistically identify. This self holds many options, possibilities and choices. Therefore you no longer need to persecute yourself so mercilessly with your self-hate. There seems to be no way out but hating yourself as long as you have missed out on this all-important process of identifying with that in you that is capable of observing, stating, naming, choosing, determining, facing, dealing with, recognising, without devastating self-judgment. (PGL 189)

Self Identification

Learning to identify ourselves with the objective observer self, and to dis-identify with the many disparate aspects of ourselves, creates inner freedom.

Kathy was full of self-doubt about her marriage. At times she felt like leaving her husband, as she felt so impatient with him. He seemed so undeveloped spiritually and emotionally. At other times, she felt that the fault was hers, that she was ungiving and blocked in her love. She would push herself to change, only to discover her resistance to opening up her feelings with him was greater than ever.

When I asked Kathy to search for a self which could accept all these contradictions and ambivalences, she visualized a valley filled with swirling mists going in different directions and obscuring her vision into the real floor of the valley. She then imagined herself sitting on the top of one of the hills, looking benignly down into the valley of her inner turmoil, watching the mists and calmly waiting for them to clear.

Kathy's visualisation changed then from hills containing a valley to four walls containing her prison. One wall she felt was the barrier of her awakening consciousness. She could not go back behind that to a time of being unaware of herself; she was barred from the "innocence" of unconsciousness. The wall opposite was her resistance, her fear of the future of her relationship. She found she could "sit" upon on the roof of her prison carefully studying the walls of her past unconsciousness and her resistance to the future. As she contemplated the walls of her inner prison, she found peace from her frantic ambivalence, and even a measure of self-acceptance.

Knowing we are not our flaws helps us be both gentle and compassionate and also non-defensive. If we do become defensive or embarrassed about our flaws, then the observer goes back yet another step and simply observes compassionately these attitudes of defensiveness or embarrassment. We continue to "step behind ourselves", as it were, until we can find a place where we can rest in serene self-acceptance.

No matter how bleak we may be feeling about ourselves, we can learn to move our awareness back to identify with the bowl of spacious, loving awareness that can accept it.

In learning to identify with the observer self, we educate all the other temporary negative selves to realize that they are not our true identity.

You learn that which observes is you and not that which is being observed. Thus, no matter how undesirable any particular aspect is, it becomes wholly possible to deal with it, accept it, explore it, work with it, no longer be frightened by it. The capacity to observe and adjudge, to note and evaluate and, last but not least, to choose the best possible attitude as to what to do with the observed – that is the true power of your real self, as it already exists right now. Freedom, liberation, the knowledge of self, the finding of self are the first steps toward realizing the greater consciousness, the universal, divine consciousness in you. (*PGL 189*)

Tools for Developing the Observer Self: Meditation and Daily Review

It takes discipline to develop the objective, compassionate observer self. To focus the mind inward and witness whatever is within the self requires practice. The most useful spiritual disciplines are meditation and daily review.

Even a few minutes of daily meditation, in which we relax the outer, busy mind and tune into our deeper selves, has tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits. Meditation can take us to every level of our inner being. We can listen to the voices of the inner child and lower self as well as make contact with the higher self. We can use it to re-educate the immature aspects and release tensions. And we can, in moments of divine grace, contact the place of unified awareness.

The first task in meditation is to release the busyness of our chattering outer ego mind, full of the preoccupations of the past and the future, and discover a calm presence who can witness ourselves in the moment. So, we take some time each day alone and in a quiet place, sitting relaxed and alert, in a symmetrical posture, with back erect, feet grounded on the floor. We take time to tune inside, free of outer distractions, to get centred. I find the following practices most helpful.

1. **Meditation with Breath:** focus all attention on the breath, the in-breath and the out-breath, as it happens, moment by moment. The breath is where voluntary and involuntary processes converge, where the boundary between “inner” and “outer” dissolves, and hence a powerful meeting ground of mind and body, the separate self and the All. While focusing on the breath, observe and let go of all other thoughts, thus bringing about a gradual one-pointedness of attention in the moment, the present awareness of each breath as it happens. Do not attempt to change anything; just focus on becoming aware of the breathing as it is. You may either count each out-breath, up to 10, and then begin again, or you can simply focus on one spot in the body – nostril, chest or abdomen – from which to observe each in-breath and each out-breath. To observe the breath as it is in the moment gradually shifts awareness away from the contents of consciousness and toward the observer self.²
2. **Mindfulness Meditation:** another centering practice is to see yourself at the threshold of the thinking mind. Identifying yourself as a sentinel at the edge of the mind, observe each thought, feeling, or sensation at the instant that it arises. Note it and let it go, not becoming

² For an excellent introduction to breathing and mindfulness meditation, see *Mindfulness in Plain English* by Venerable Henepola Gunaratana.

attached to whatever arises. Continually refocus on the sentinel awareness, that which does the observing. This gradually slows down the body-mind so you can eventually pay attention to each discrete inner experience and let it pass without judgment or attachment. Again, do not attempt to change anything, only to be aware of **what is**.

Both these centering practices will strengthen identification with the objective, compassionate self-observer. Once you have the ability to identify with the witness, you can use your period of meditation for working with your immature selves, and for listening to the guidance of your enlightened selves.

In Chapter Ten we will talk about using meditation to help transform the lower self by engaging in a three-way inner dialogue between the positive ego, the lower self, and the higher life. Chapter Eleven will present a visualization for creating a more positive and fulfilling life. But these are complex tasks to be attempted only after we have calmed the outer mind and become identified with the observer self.

3. **Prayer:** prayer can easily be woven into periods of quiet meditation. Prayer comes from the spontaneous desire of the personality to seek alignment with, or protection or guidance from, some higher power or spirit. Prayer can, of course, take many forms – from the innocent expression of a sincere wish to a complex and elaborate ritual of evocation. As our spiritual evolution progresses, prayer evolves from a simple petition to a higher power viewed as outside the self into a means of issuing our requests deep into our own creative soul substance, while evoking the help of universal powers.

Like meditation, prayer is a path for surrender of the little ego to the greater energies of life. But where meditation is more receptive and quiet, prayer is directed toward some goal in a more active engagement of divinity. For me, the ultimate prayer for aligning individual ego and purpose to the larger design of God is “Not my will, but Thine, be done.”

Daily Review

In addition to daily meditation and prayer, daily review is the most important spiritual practice for strengthening our self-awareness. We take time every day to review our day’s inner as well as outer life. This is best done by keeping a written journal, but time spent in quiet contemplation of the day is also useful. Keeping a journal or a diary is always a good way to build focused self-awareness. We can include dreams, written guidance, and self-reflection in a journal.

The discipline of daily review, however, goes beyond a simple record of the outer (or inner) events of the day. It is a specific practice that furthers our ability to identify with the observer self and to work with our other selves.

Here is how it is done: let the events of the day pass in front of you, and **specifically note any incidents which gave you a disharmonious feeling or reaction**. Make notes about these and only these occurrences, knowing they provide clues to the inner states that gave rise to these manifestations.

Every negative experience is an invitation to look deeper into ourselves and discover the day’s lessons. In making a daily review, we learn to become aware of how we really react, so these thoughts/feelings do not have a chance to accumulate in the unconscious. We learn to “come clean” with ourselves every day, thus performing a kind of emotional hygiene as important to our spiritual well-being as physical hygiene is to our bodies.

In doing daily review we strengthen our desire for truth, as we give ourselves permission to experience and note whatever we actually thought and felt, rather than what we think we ought to have done, felt or thought. When we encounter resistance, we note it just as we would any other aspect of ourselves. Daily review prevents self-deception, pretense, and repression – all the ingredients of mental disturbance and confusion.

Once we have begun to see a pattern in our experience, then we can begin to look more deeply into ourselves for the origin of this pattern. We ask ourselves, “Who is the person within me who reacts in this way?” And then we can work with the different selves that emerge, initiating a dialogue between the part of ourselves in need of healing and the higher self which can direct the healing. After a while, daily review will become our regular time to engage the selves which have emerged during the day.

We can do a lot of work on our own through the practices of daily meditation, prayer, and daily review. I must add, however, that every person consciously following the spiritual path also needs an outside helper at some times to assist in the work of transformation. We are all blinded to aspects of ourselves which can only be accurately perceived by others. And we need the safety and support of other human beings who witness our pain and acknowledge our struggle. We need other humans to reflect the “thou” of our observer self, able to stand by us as we face our pain and distortions.

Our spiritual development will be greatly facilitated by regular spiritual practice, but such discipline cannot be forced. Daily spiritual practice is, I believe, a real need of human beings seeking to become more conscious. However, spiritual discipline must evolve slowly and organically, usually over years of at first sporadic practice. Developing a spiritual practice should not become yet another club used by our perfectionism to beat up on ourselves. (“See how terrible you are, you aren’t working hard enough on yourself or meditating enough,” or whatever.)

The ego is necessary to establish self-discipline, but it cannot do the job alone. Evoking the energies of the higher self can ease the process. The practice of self-observation will collapse quickly if it is forced and unpleasant. If we feel our real need for self-understanding, the experience of a spiritual discipline will bring feelings of pleasure and success. When we are meditating because it feels good, and working on ourselves because we really know the relief of being in truth rather than in ignorance about ourselves, then our practice will be truly grounded.

Jody had developed her spiritual practice during her early work in the Pathwork, but more recently she had let her daily meditation slide as her outer life had become much more busy and fulfilled. She meditated less frequently and only when she felt particularly uncentered. In a session with me, Jody spoke of an inner tension she felt by being “caught”, as she put it, “in the jaws of the day,” pushed by the demands of her outer life. When, with my encouragement, Jody returned to daily meditation practice, she noticed her tension lessening. Her life began to turn more smoothly. Putting meditation into the centre of her lifefelt, Jody said, “like snapping the centre into an old 45 RPM record which otherwise just flopped around on the turntable.”

On the spiritual path of self-knowledge we will encounter many states and levels of consciousness within the self. We may find ourselves thinking unfamiliar thoughts – loftier, or crazier, or meaner thoughts than we ever dreamed we would think. We may find ourselves feeling feelings we would never have dreamed possible – unbearable agony or unexpected ecstasy. The spiritual path requires that we open to all our multiple selves, journeying always toward the centre of self, toward the unitive state of consciousness. The practice of self-observation is the bridge from our ordinary scattered selves to the core of our unified self.

Exercises for Chapter 3

1. Pick an issue of some concern in your life now. Identify two of your inner “cast of characters,” preferably ones which have opposing points of view on this issue. First describe briefly these two characters and their points of view. Then create a written dialogue between these two opposing characters inside you in relation to this issue. Explore fully each side’s point of view, and see if you can learn more about your own conflicts or ambivalence in this area.
2. Practice written daily review for five days, summarizing at least one time each day when you experienced disharmonious thoughts and feelings. At the end of five days, see if you find the common denominators of these experiences.
3. Practice daily meditation for at least ten minutes each day for five days. Write out when you did it each day, and summarize each day’s experience. You may use either of the centering practices discussed in this chapter, but say clearly which one you tried – either following the breath, or standing at the threshold of the mind observing thoughts/feelings/sensations.
4. Practice identifying with your objective observer-self during some daily routine act, like brushing your teeth, for five days. During these times, observe your outer actions, and observe your inner experience. Write about your experiences.