

Science and Inner Life

by Robert Magrisso



To live and work as a scientist is to live with a vivid sense of the unknown. You are at the frontiers of knowledge about the mostly hidden order of the way things work. There is the awareness that not everything is as it seems and that there are likely to be unifying general principles behind seemingly unconnected phenomena. You search for patterns and upon finding one, formulate a working hypothesis that makes certain assumptions about

reality, and then test its implications. This is the “experiment. Predictions are either verified or refuted, giving greater or lesser validity or “truth” to the theories created in this way. While you may not ever have “absolute truth,” this open-ended process helps to clear the way to deeper understandings.

Imagine studying one's own subjectivity and behavior in this same spirit. This is one aspect of the path of inner work that Cafh offers. It is a path that integrates contemplation and action with the goal of increasing awareness, for increased awareness is the first step toward living better. I need to begin with a questioning attitude, skeptical of what I already think I know and, at the same time, open to other possibilities. I need to approach my own self with a scientific spirit of discovery and see life as an experimentalist. Such a process leads me not only to understand myself better but also the world within which I live, for that outside world always comes “in” through my subjectivity. “Inner” and “outer” are always integrally related. By making my own mind the subject of inquiry, I begin questioning the way it works and its contents, and after observing it, I make a working hypothesis that is testable in real life.

A couple of examples may help illustrate this method.

I am very easily aroused to anger by a particular person. He is not in any way a bad person and, in fact, he is a lot like me. I meditate on this person, holding his image in my mind. I observe my feelings and recognize that many of the negative qualities that I attribute to him are exactly qualities of my own self that I wish were not there. He is the very embodiment of my shadow, my pride, my will to power and prestige, my self-centeredness that ignores the feelings of those around me. I am observing in great detail as I hold his image in a contemplative state, forming the hypothesis that my antipathy toward him is actually antipathy toward aspects of myself. I see very concretely and explicitly those aspects. I make a working hypothesis that if I learn to

accept these things in myself, to be less judgmental, he won't irritate me as much. I try it. I recognize these qualities as qualities I share with all other human beings, in different proportions, of course.

Next time I am with this individual, I feel the feelings, but they are less intense. Indeed, after a while, they seem to fade into unimportance. Maybe, I have discovered something of value. Maybe, too, this discovery can serve as the basis for further investigation and experimentation with my own shadow, discovering those parts of myself which are less endearing and making me more accepting of others.

Another example. I observe that there are moments when I spontaneously experience a physical sense of living on a planet in space. It may be triggered by the curvature of the horizon, especially at a beach, where the curve of the earth is evident, or it may be triggered by looking at the sky, especially clear star-filled night skies. Trees seem to bring this state as well. It is a very expansive feeling and it calms me, putting everything into a kind of "cosmic perspective." My working hypothesis is that if I could remember this perspective, it would improve my mind, making me happier and giving me more equanimity.

I meditate on this image of living on a planet, imagining the sun as a star (which of course it is), trying to imagine distances, the rotation of the earth, the moon and so on. I imagine seeing the house in which I live from higher and higher elevations. It is funny that using the imagination in this way actually brings me closer to reality than my normal perceptions of things! I recognize my normal ("known") perceptions as so limited—about 68 inches from the ground. Later I try to remember this imagining while walking in the city streets, and I find that it is not hard to have a touch of this "cosmic consciousness" simply entering into all my considerations, coloring them and expanding not only perceptions, but my heart as well. It is easier to keep the "big picture" in mind and that helps improve all my interactions.

The regular, daily practice of using observation, analysis and testing within the context of a contemplative state has been of great help to me in integrating spiritual ideals and my daily life. To work in this way with others has been a great joy in itself and one of the gifts of having a concrete method which gives direction.