



## Observation versus Analysis

By JOHN BICKART, Ph.D. | **Science Education and Spiritual Transformation** / Chapter 1: Observation versus Analysis

Let's underscore an important point, namely ...  
GOOD OBSERVATION = GOOD SCIENCE.

### Left and Right Brain, Head and Heart

Has this ever happened to you? You are with a close friend. You are feeling love. You look into your friend's eyes. You feel something strong - your friend clearly feels it, too. Suddenly you find thoughts of your next meal flying through your mind. Then, you start remembering your chores. Now, as B.B. King sings, "The thrill is gone."

Don't you wish you could concentrate better? I do. Come with me into my classroom and I'll show a fun way to increase concentration that I have used for over 50 years. I will light a simple candle and we'll do this great 'O/A' (Observation / Analysis) technique to help you stay observing instead of jumping to other thoughts. By the end of the lesson, I hope you will see that this is the heart of where science meets deeper spiritual practices. Many spiritual traditions use some form of meditation or concentration. Observation can be meditation. If we can really bring our full attention to our candle today, you could say that we meditated on the candle.

Lain McGilchrist speaks highly of observation in his book, *The Master and His Emissary* (2009), pointing out that it can be an extremely right brain activity, as opposed to analysis, which is highly left brain. He stresses throughout the book that the right brain (the Master) should lead the left brain (the Emissary) if humankind is to achieve

harmony. He points out extensively how most western cultures operate in precisely the opposite way. His conclusion is that this causes much of the difficulties of western societies. "In Japan, however, science students, who 'observe' phenomena, do so with quite a different meaning, and in quite a different spirit, from their Western counterparts. The word kansatsu, which is translated as 'observe', is closer to the meaning of the word 'gaze', which we use only when we are in a state of rapt attention in which we lose ourselves and feel connected to the other. The syllable kan in kansatsu contains the nuance that the one who gazes comes to feel a 'one-body-ness' with the object of gaze." (McGilchrist, 2009, Locations 4559-4563)

So, this 'O/A' technique helps concentration, builds character, and it also increases critical scientific thinking. The whole secret lies in the ability to stay in right brain or heart observation, before moving to left brain or head analysis. History shows that excellent critical thinkers do not jump to conclusions; they gather all of the facts with pure observation, then they use analytic reasoning to sort them out. It would not be critical thinking to change this order and use the left brain thinking before we have taken in a whole picture with right brain observation.

### ***Observation Warm-up Exercise***

As a first, quick exercise, try this. Close your eyes and touch your nose. Now, touch your eyes and note that your nose's position is a little lower and centered below your eyes. Now, run your fingers from your forehead past your nose to your chin to note where the nose is positioned vertically. Now, touch your nose and note its height and width. Note the shape of your nose. Now, open your eyes. Look at other people. Are you noticing their noses?

This is a simple exercise that shows that you see all around you what you are currently focused on. It is, of course, an example of a physical focus. But the same lesson applies to the spiritual act of a focus in your inner life. Are you more aware of things being done well or poorly? Do you get more interested in the crime or the good deed? Always, you are surrounded by good and bad. A large part of your reactions to your life are set in motion by your inner focus. And this is very often influenced by past experiences and beliefs. The 'O/A' technique we are about to practice helps you take control of this focus by becoming aware of it.

But there is more. Besides noticing if you look more for good or bad, the 'O/A' technique helps you become aware of when you are staying in pure, non-judgmental observation versus when your attention is being influenced by previous thoughts that frame your focus. Pure observation does not use thinking, whereas analysis is all thinking. To separate these is to know when you are purely in observation mode: listening, watching, tasting, smelling, or feeling versus when you are in analysis mode: deducing, concluding, judging, reasoning, or assuming.

### **Making an 'O/A' (Observation/Analysis)**

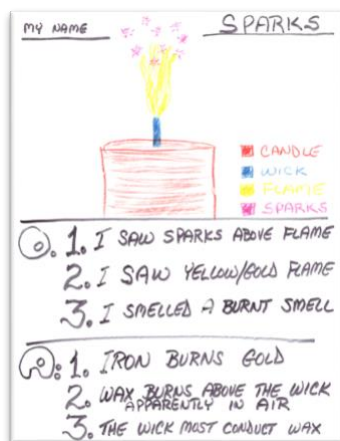
Here is an exercise in becoming conscious of using heart thought to *observe* and head thought to *analyze*. You can do this with any simple event - pouring water, reading a poem, eating ice cream. This one is a



science demonstration we called, 'Sparkling Candle'. It is accomplished by sprinkling some fine iron filings onto a lit candle and watching.

- *I like to conduct this demonstration interactively, with students calling out their observations. As each comment is called out, the class and I first decide if the proposed comment is purely an observation – without analytical thought. We are careful to be accurate. For example, we note details like: the golden color of the sparks, that the sparks occur above the flame, that the flame has parts and occurs above the wick. Once a class is adept at knowing the difference between observations and analyses, we often do the demonstration in silence, trying to achieve **kanatsu** ('one-body-ness' with the object of gaze).*
- *Now, replay the demonstration in your mind. Try to be accurate - adding nothing of your own thoughts. This may be even more important than watching the demonstration the first time.*

- Then we create an O/A together, if the class is not familiar with O/As. We try to draw the picture with simple artwork. It should take up as much of the upper half of the paper as possible, so as to enlarge the main parts that the observer wishes to show. We try to limit ourselves to four colors so that – like taking notes – we stay focused on the big picture. We color code and label our parts.



- Then we use the bottom half of the paper to write three **Observations** (The 3 'O's). The 'O's are strictly that which your senses took in. With younger children, I call these, 'what you saw, smelled, heard, tasted, or felt'.
- Then we write the three **Analyses** (The 3 'A's). These are ideas that you thought about: why it happened, how it works, uses of it.

*\*Important: this process accents observations. We observed **four** times (doing it, replaying it in our minds, drawing it, then writing the 3 'O's). We only analyzed once at the very end when we wrote our 3 'A's. This builds great character, while sharpening your critical thinking skills because it teaches you to suspend judgement until you have heard the facts. Our times are skewed toward analysis, hence we are attempting here to regain balance.*

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## **My Focus**

Whatever grabs my attention - my focus - is my teacher - at least in the moment. Who causes that focus? Who is that teacher? I am.

Picture this. When I am teaching and I really want to impart some piece of wisdom, I bring out my best observation techniques. I try to be the best observer I can be and allow my thoughts to drop out of the way. I try to become like an open channel to see if something bigger and better can come through me. And if some brilliant idea appears in my mind, I just say, "Thank you."

If I 'got out of the way', could it still be me who came up with the new and better idea? I think so. I think that my ordinary, lower self that operates the car and comes to work simply opened to my higher self. I think that I was tapping into the source of the best ways to do things. So, who's the teacher? Well, it's you - it's me. But it's the big you, the TEACHER - the part of you that is connected to higher wisdom than the ordinary you. By making yourself ready, then letting go of your most recent ideas - you open the door to get a new and improved way - you are truly alive.

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## **An Even More Important Use of 'O/A's**

I spoke about a brief version of this 'O/A' technique in a workshop and book by the same name, *20 Opportunities to Transform Yourself While Teaching (2022)* which was created for The Collaborative for Spirituality in Education (CSE) at Columbia University's Teachers College. The

brief technique is described below from a chapter on "Intuitive Teaching."

*Intuitive teaching is letting the intuition come into you even though you are the one doing the speaking. It's listening while allowing for direction. You find yourself hearing the words coming out of your mouth. And maybe, just maybe, they are not yours. Is it possible that intuitions come from some deeper place of consciousness? Well, wherever they come from, if you sense that great ideas are available that seem better than what you had planned, the question becomes, "How do I access this wisdom?"*

*So, today's wake up call is to do a sixty second exercise to promote your chances for intuitions. Take one hand, either one, and close it. Now, without thinking - try not to think about your hand - "Oh, look, my fingers look so chubby" - or any thoughts of association - or "Why are we doing this?" Just let your thoughts go through, if they come in, or block them, if you have the ability. Just watch your hand closing. And now, slowly, staying in pure observation mode - open your hand.*

*-pause-*

*And now, replay what you just did, in your mind. Use your inner vision with your eyes closed or, at least, with your eyes not looking out. Also replay anything your other senses may have experienced so that you create an exact re-enactment.*

*That's the whole exercise - it only takes a minute. And you can do this over and over during the day. You are clearing - you're meditating while you are in motion, while the day is happening - while you're doing things. You cleared out your mind and practiced the act of not using your mind to*

*touch that which is happening. You became a pure observer. And you did it even more powerfully by pausing to replay it. This is another version of mindful walking with the added practice of replaying what you just did.*

*Now, if you use this exercise to clear your mind while you are speaking - to your own self - you can have enough clarity - open space - to receive intuitions, even though you're active. And that's being an intuitive teacher.*

*When you cleared your mind and purely observed, you were in your heart, so to speak. And the best part is that although you practiced engaging your heart in this very simple way, you are preparing yourself to access the ability to go to no mind and engage your heart when you have a serious problem. And that is the real purpose of this wake up call. (Bickart, 2022, p. 20)*

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## References

- Bickart, J. (2022). *20 Opportunities to Transform Yourself While Teaching*. Asheville, NC: Red Shirt Interactive Group.
- McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The master and his emissary: the divided brain and the making of the Western world*. New Haven: Yale University Press.