

SELF OBSERVATION with CHARLES TART, Ph.D.

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. Our topic today is "Self Observation," and my guest is Professor Charles Tart, member of the Department of Psychology at the University of California at Davis, a past president of the Parapsychological Association, and the author of numerous books, including *Transpersonal Psychologies*, *States of Consciousness*, *Altered States of Consciousness*, and most recently, *Waking Up*. Welcome, Charlie.

CHARLES TART, Ph.D.: I'm glad to be here, Jeff.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to have you here. You know, when we talk about self observation, I think a lot of people feel a little embarrassed. It's as though if they begin to observe themselves they get self conscious, they blush a little bit. It's almost as if there's some kind of a subconscious agreement amongst people not to look too closely at themselves.

TART: Yes, that's one of the sad parts of this whole field. So many of us have been taught or conditioned in childhood that we're not good, we're lacking, we're not good enough. And so that makes us very reluctant to look at ourselves. And yet if we don't learn how to find out what we're really like, then we don't use our mind efficiently; we make all sorts of mistakes. So we have to learn to self observe, but it has to be done very carefully. You know, if you want to control people, anthropologists have distinguished several ways of controlling people. One way is to follow them around with guards. The trouble is, that's an expensive way. Those guards aren't doing anything productive, and they're watching you all the time. A much more efficient way is to put a guard in someone's head -- to take someone when they're a child and split their mind, so that a part of their mind absorbs all the standards that the parents and the society want them to have, and watches for transgressions. And it's not even that simple, because that part of the mind is also given the power to make you feel rotten. Freud talked about it as the superego, this part of us that's over our ordinary conscious self and can make us feel bad. Now, I want to talk about the value of self observation, but I'm not talking about superego observation. Most of us already know how to do that, and we feel bad, right? We selectively watch ourselves, and catch ourselves in a fault, or sinning, or lacking, and then we feel rotten about it.

MISHLOVE: And then, often when other people want us to look at ourselves, it's for the purpose of making us feel guilty about something we've done.

TART: Exactly. Right. We lay a lot of guilt trips on each other to try to control each other. So it's not surprising that most people don't want to look inside, right? Distract themselves with anything, but not look inside themselves.

MISHLOVE: It's as if self observation becomes associated or linked somehow with feelings of guilt.

TART: Exactly. I mean, probably most viewers can think of times from their childhood when they were in a difficult situation, were trying to get out of it, and one or the other parent said, "Be honest. Look at yourself. Tell me the truth." And so that whole idea of knowing the truth about yourself, or revealing that truth to others, became associated with fear, with punishment, with feeling rotten.

MISHLOVE: In a religious sense, it even gets associated with sin. I mean, it's not just your parents, it's like God is up there.

TART: Exactly. That's what makes the superego so powerful. See, there's another distinction you can make. Anthropologists say that in some cultures people are controlled by shame: if people knew what you did, you would be so ashamed. That's pretty good, but it has a little "out." If you can get away with it and nobody knows it was you, you're tempted. The superego is one step better, because even if nobody else knows, you know and God knows, and so you get punished for even thinking about doing things.

MISHLOVE: Let me just sidestep, or take a little side road for a second. Are you suggesting that in some of these primitive cultures people don't have superegos -- that it's something unique to our culture?

TART: It's certainly not unique to our culture, but yes, there are some cultures in which the superego is a very minor part of a given person's mind. Our culture today is mixed on it. We've drifted more toward a shame sort of culture, where what the public knows, what other people know, is more important. But we were primarily a superego culture. And of course that comes from our whole Judaeo-Christian heritage -- you know, God is watching.

MISHLOVE: So guilt, and the fear of punishment of the superego, is one of the forces that mitigates against self observation.

TART: Right.

MISHLOVE: Are there some other major obstacles to self observation?

TART: Oh sure. We're not taught to do it. The whole culture gives us a picture that we're not good, so we don't want to look. The Freudian notion, for instance, that basically we're wild animals with a thin veneer of civilization on top, keeping us from running amok. I mean, who wants to look inside this picture?

MISHLOVE: Sex and aggression.

TART: Right. Or if you're born in original sin and basically you're rotten and going to hell, who wants to look at that? So our culture has invented a multitude of ways to distract yourself from ever having to look inside. But the result is that although we apparently avoid the pain of seeing what we fear we'll see, we then go on to really mess up our lives because we don't know ourselves. We don't know what we're really like, we don't know what we want, we don't know our resources well, and we make mistakes.

MISHLOVE: And yet we have this ancient philosophical tradition, which I think goes back at least to Socrates, where he says, "Man, know thyself." But when I studied philosophy in college, there was none of that.

TART: You didn't have Introspection 101 and 102?

MISHLOVE: None at all, no. Introspection is outlawed even in psychology pretty much these days.

TART: And you know, not only is it effectively banned, but we don't have the skill to introspect very well. It's one thing to tell somebody, "Start observing yourself. See how you really feel, what's really going on." But if people take that seriously, what they often find is that it's very hard to concentrate. Their attention drifts. They get confused as to what they're looking at, and pretty soon they end up watching TV, distracting themselves again.

MISHLOVE: You know, what you're saying reminds me of an episode as an undergraduate psychology student back at the University of Wisconsin in the 60s. I helped form the Psychology Students' Association, and I was elected to be the vice president when I gave a little speech in which I said, "I became a psychology major in order to know myself, and I'm not learning anything here in this department."

TART: I bet your fellow students loved it, and it didn't go over well with the faculty.

MISHLOVE: I got a standing ovation at the time, but I doubt, or I don't know, that there's been much change in academic psychology since then either.

TART: Not much. I mean, there's been a little bit of loosening up. Even the behaviorists now talk about verbal reports of fantasy behavior, or something. But still, no recognition that we need to systematically observe our own minds.

MISHLOVE: I would think that ultimately this should be the goal of psychology.

TART: I wouldn't want to make it as the goal, because we have learned a lot by concentrating on observing people from the outside. See, one of the things that you learn when you practice self observation is that you fool yourself, that you're a very biased observer. And to get the feedback from somebody else can be so helpful. For instance, take a classic case in therapy. Somebody goes into therapy, and the therapist tries to find out the problem, and they say something like, "Do you get along with your father?" And the client says, "Yeah, I get along just fine." The therapist says, "Really? No problems at all?" "No!" The client isn't observing himself very well. In fact, we now know there are systematic psychological blocks to his knowing that. But the therapist can see there's a big discrepancy between the behavior and the report, and that suggests a line of work that you might learn a lot from. So we need both. We need feedback from other people as to how they perceive us, as well as learning to perceive ourselves from the inside.

MISHLOVE: Is this art of self observation the goal of any discipline at all?

TART: No. Many spiritual disciplines put very little emphasis on self observation, because they already know what's right, and they simply give you a prescription: you behave according to this set of rules, and that's what salvation is about. Or many spiritual disciplines practice a very biased self observation. It's a superego type of thing: here are the sins you have to watch out for. So you become very sensitized to signs of those. The kind of self observation I'm talking about involves making a commitment to learn the truth about yourself and your world, no matter what it is. Not to observe yourself to catch yourself in your sins. Not to observe yourself only when you happen to be doing something you like. Not to observe yourself in order to support what you already believe, but to try to observe yourself in your world to see what really is. And that's a commitment. I like to quote a famous American spiritual leader of a sort there, Patrick Henry: "Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom." If you aren't vigilant about yourself, with a commitment to knowing reality as it is, you'll build up fantasies. You'll live in this state that I call consensus trance. You're lost in fantasies, and they're widely shared in the culture. Everybody else has similar fantasies. So we all think we're normal, but we're seriously cut off from the world around us, and do a lot of stupid things as a result.

MISHLOVE: And yet it seems to me that there's a paradox there, because not only is the world as it is, but it is as we create it. We're not just passive in this process.

TART: That's right. One of the things you learn from observing yourself is that you aren't just taking it in. You're looking at this and not that. You're selectively listening to this part of the conversation and not the other. But that's fine. That's what you're seeking to learn -- how do I run my psychological machinery, as it were? And you see that, and you say, "OK, can I see it more clearly? Can I see what's behind that? What else can I learn about this?" But again, it has to be done with this commitment to "I'll accept whatever I learn." It can't be "I'd like to have an insight that shows me how wonderful I am, or what an awful sinner I am." It has to be "I want to see what's in myself. I'm looking for the truth." And the truth is very rewarding in a subtle kind of way, even if you don't like what you see in yourself -- and I don't know how many times, in practicing self observation, I've seen things in myself that I don't like at all, that I'm ashamed of. And yet there's a sort of authenticity that comes from the fact that you know you're trying to be as honest as you can. And that's satisfying.

MISHLOVE: I would think that there might be something to the Hegelian notion of a dialectic, where you come to a point of view about yourself, and then you might notice that the opposite point of view is also true sometimes, and then you begin to develop a synthesis, and then discover something in opposition to that synthesis, and so on.

TART: And sometimes, before that synthesis, you have to live with the opposition for a long period of time. Let's get concrete. I'll give you an example of self observation, which I began doing systematically many years ago. I began to notice my mental attitude when I was driving, and I realized that I was very angry at drivers who did not follow the rules. If they followed too closely behind me, or cut in too closely in front of me, I didn't like that. In fact, as I observed it more I realized I was so angry that I wanted them to die. I mean, anybody who followed me too closely and threatened my life deserved to die. Well, it was hard to make that observation. I didn't like it, because I think of myself as a kind, understanding person, and all that. But there it was, and I was going to stick with it and watch it for a few more times until it went away. Well, it wouldn't go away for three years. Everytime I got in the car, part of me wanted to kill whenever anybody followed too close. And it didn't matter that I didn't like it. I had to stay with it. Eventually, keeping the focus of consciousness there, it made some changes occur.

MISHLOVE: So what you're saying is that simply by observing yourself that way, you can't change yourself.

TART: Well, sometimes observation alone will change yourself. There are a lot of things that in a psychological sense aren't very potent. They're not hooked in with real deep, powerful emotions. They're habits of thought and feeling and perception, and they have to run in the dark, as it were, without too much consciousness. Once the light of consciousness is put on them two or three times, something like that, they just sort of fade away.

MISHLOVE: You can chase away the little imps, but not the big demons.

TART: Right. Some of those things you find won't go away, and you have to commit yourself to observing them even more closely, observe the feeling states associated with them. And eventually you may get some insights to make them go away, or you may have to eventually get yourself involved in some kind of training or discipline to specifically do something about those kinds of things.

MISHLOVE: So now when you drive the car you don't get that way anymore, is that right?

TART: It's not anywhere near as bad now. I don't pay as much attention to it. And now I get mad at the people who don't signal their left-hand turns until they're actually making the turn, when you haven't had time to move over into the other lane. No, when I first started self observation I thought, "Right; I should be able to do this for a month and become a perfect being." But it's a long haul. But it's satisfying.

MISHLOVE: Are there particular techniques that you would recommend for people?

TART: Yes. It's no good just to tell somebody that you should observe yourself. That's like saying, "Be good." Lots of people have already told us that. You have to practice. You have to do things, for example, just to learn to focus your attention clearly. If most people try a concentration exercise, like for instance, "Look at this sweep-second hand on your watch, or the little digital display, and don't think of anything else. Just be aware of it," most people will find that they're lucky if ten seconds can go by before they're wondering, "When will this be over? I wonder what I'll have for lunch tomorrow?" You know, the mind goes off --

MISHLOVE: It's very hard to lock in on just one item.

TART: Yes. And as you begin to observe yourself, you find that's one of the main qualities of ordinary consciousness. We're constantly distracted, and drift to something else. We can't concentrate, in a very real sense.

MISHLOVE: Well, we've got so many billions of neurons that want to keep busy, I suppose.

TART: Well, they want to keep busy, but they're not in control. So once you see that this is difficult, you can begin practicing in simple ways. For instance, as we and the viewers sit here right now, this is an interesting conversation, but are you aware of your position in the chair? What do your arms feel like as you sit there in that chair? Are you breathing fully? Can you notice whether you're breathing, and still be aware of what I'm talking about at this moment? When you shook your head just then, how much was that a conscious decision, and how much was it a habitual sort of thing that's done? You can't expect to say, "I'll start self observation, and I'll see these fantastic things about myself right away," because that's a biased observation. You have to say, "For the next five minutes, say, I'm going to see every little thing that comes along, even if it's trivial, even if I don't think it's important," because that trains you to pay attention, and that's really the foundation stone.

MISHLOVE: So in other words, you would recommend people isolating a small block of time like five minutes, to really pay attention, to really notice everything.

TART: Sure. If I tell somebody, "Observe yourself for the next hour," they'll observe themselves for two or three minutes if they're lucky. They'll forget about it, and then they'll remember it again and feel guilty because they forgot. To try to do it for an hour right off, it's too hard. You're setting yourself up for failure. Set yourself up for thirty seconds of really noticing what's happening in your body. Or when you get good, five minutes of noticing when you walk down the street, how do you move your arms? When you sit in a room with nothing to do, what do you look at? Is there a pattern to the way you look around the room? Start with simple things, and things that aren't that threatening. You know, if you have to start right away with, "I'm going to observe the way I'm nasty to people while I'm being kind to them," that's heavy. That's going to produce a lot of resistance. But if you learn to focus on the simple things, then you can get more into the complex things, and the things that are emotionally relevant. And of course that's the most important source of things.

MISHLOVE: Do you recommend, then, that people keep a journal, or notes of these observations?

TART: I have ambivalent feelings about that. If you self observe in order to get interesting material to write in your journal, you're going to be selectively self observing. I mean, who's going to write in their journal, "I noticed an itch in my left elbow, and as I noticed the itch in the left elbow, it spread down to my left wrist?" Nobody's going to write that in a journal. People want a dramatic journal, an important journal. But that's selective attention. There's nothing wrong with selective attention at certain times, especially if you do it voluntarily.

MISHLOVE: But you're suggesting it's really important to notice the seemingly trivial things.

TART: Yes. To be able to stay in the here and now. That's what self observation ultimately leads up to -- an ability to be present, and present in what's really going on. And let's face it, sometimes in the present, nothing spectacular is happening. You're sitting and your elbow's itching.

MISHLOVE: And you're also suggesting, then, that physiological self awareness is important. By self you mean the body.

TART: Well, we have bodies. They're full of sensations. They form an excellent reference point to start self observation. I'm not limiting it to that, of course. So for example, if something emotional happens, it's very useful to try to observe your emotions as if you were a fair witness, a neutral observer. Suppose you were a reporter having to write up an objective account of what this person feels like. At the same time they're happening in you, so you're not completely distinct. But you try, to see how much you can see: what do you really feel like, instead of what would you like to feel like, or what you ought to feel like? And then you have insights in yourself.

MISHLOVE: And I guess what you're saying is the last thing a person should start to look at is the melodrama that we're all involved in.

TART: Well, a person can certainly start there, but don't be surprised if it's hard, and don't let your superego pick it up. Now that's another important part of self observation. If you already have a harsh superego -- and a lot of people do -- if you systematically try to pay more attention to yourself, you're going to see a lot of things you don't like, and your superego's going to say, "Ha! Gotcha! Look at that nasty thought that you have about that person." That kind of thing. Then you have to uplevel a little bit, and try to observe the superego in action, instead of just identifying with it, instead of just being carried away with it. But it's an important distinction to make, an important warning. Don't underestimate the power of the superego. Whenever you see someone who's suicided, you see the power of the superego in action: "You are so bad that only death will begin to do it." Or another one of my favorite examples: there have been a number of cases in England where a house has caught on fire, and the firemen knew the person was right inside the front door and could have gotten out. They saw movement through the curtains, but the person died from smoke inhalation or being burned to death. Well, it turned out they were naked. They couldn't go out the door with people out there when they were naked.

MISHLOVE: They would have been mortified.

TART: Yes, so the superego made them feel ashamed enough of being naked that it amounted to a choice to die instead. The superego is very powerful, far too powerful in many cases.

MISHLOVE: That's remarkable. So in self observation, then, we want to observe our superego in order to begin to understand its power over us, I suppose.

TART: Yes, but don't start with the superego. Start with simple things: how do you feel right now? Now, you know, you mentioned I focused a lot on the body. That's actually more subtle than you think, because a lot of our emotions express themselves as certain kinds of bodily feelings. So while you think you're mainly looking toward what are your physical sensations, you're actually learning to tune in more to the subtleties of your emotions.

MISHLOVE: In other words, an itch might not be just an itch, it might be reflecting some kind of deeper level of experience.

TART: That's right. And what does the itch turn into? What's the feeling tone that goes with the itch?

MISHLOVE: If the itch could talk, what would it say?

TART: Right, and you can have somebody ask you things like that, as in gestalt therapy. Of course, certain kinds of therapy, like gestalt, can be seen very usefully as having an outsider take up this function of neutral observer. Here's somebody you hire to ask you questions from an uninvolved viewpoint that make you look at yourself. Now, that's fine, and for certain special occasions you have to do that kind of thing. But you can't have a gestalt therapist or someone following you around all day and all night. You have to learn to be your own observer, to understand yourself.

MISHLOVE: As we observe ourselves, and then observe ourselves observing ourselves, it would seem that gradually, slowly, layer by layer, we become enlarged as human beings.

TART: Yes, we get a much wider idea of who we are. You know, when we get conditioned into consensus trance, our human potentials are narrowed. We could be so many things, but society says, "This is good, this is good, that's bad, don't do that," and our self concept gets narrow and squeezed and tight, and it gets very sad after awhile. You know, G.I. Gurdjieff expressed it very -- I want to say beautifully, but that's not quite the word -- let's say very powerfully, once, when he said a lot of people you see walking around in the street are dead. They have been so squeezed in terms of their inner psychological self that it's all habit and conditioning, and the essence, the vitality, is all gone from it. It's real sad.

MISHLOVE: It reminds me of another well-known phrase, the author of which I don't remember, that the unexamined life is not a life worth living.

TART: That's right. And when we don't observe ourselves, we condemn ourselves to an unexamined life. Now, there's another obstacle to self observation that's important too. Sometimes people will do limited self observation. They know something's wrong. Their life isn't going right, or there are obvious problems, or it's empty. So they observe themselves for awhile, and they see a part of what's wrong, but they want to change so badly that as soon as they get one or two ideas of how they're not living right, they become converted to some religion that claims to save you from that particular thing, or to some particular growth thing, and they concentrate exclusively on changing that, without having gotten a good idea of what the rest of their mind is like.

MISHLOVE: Without continuing the process.

TART: Yes, they stop the process.

MISHLOVE: And I would imagine there's a lot of social pressure -- who was it? Alan Watts wrote the book about the conspiracy --

TART: The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are.

MISHLOVE: Yes. It's as if, if other people around me start to really observe themselves, really know themselves well, then it begins to put some pressure on me.

TART: We talked earlier about how people try to make each other feel guilty in order to manipulate each other. Sometimes we try to make each other have insights, but I want you to have the insights I approve of. There was a time when consciousness-raising groups were very popular. But as near as I could tell, consciousness raising meant when you agreed with my views, now your consciousness was raised. You should start self observation not with the idea that there are certain truths that somebody else has already figured out that you've got to observe for yourself and then you've arrived, but with a much more open-ended idea that I want to know for myself, I want to see things the way they are.

MISHLOVE: Regardless of the outcome.

TART: Regardless, right. Now, I've mentioned negative sides of that. I don't want to leave the impression that all you ever see is these horrible sides of yourself. A lot of the sides of ourselves that have been repressed are very positive. Our vitality, our childlike joy at being alive, a lot of our creativity and talents -- that's been squeezed down too. And you can find that.

MISHLOVE: And certainly, I would think, our spirituality.

TART: Yes, our spirituality is in there too, underneath our education.

MISHLOVE: And as a parapsychologist, I imagine you would agree that we probably would begin observing psychic phenomena or experiences.

TART: Yes, I think psychic powers can easily emerge as a natural result of expanding your concept of who you are through self observation.

MISHLOVE: Do you have a sense of where this all ends -- I mean, without trying to preprogram? Because everyone needs to discover it, I guess, themselves.

TART: No, I have no sense of where it ends, and I don't want to have a sense of where it ends. I mean, it's easy to fall into this trap of you've only got ten sets more to go, and then you reach some final point, like being dead, or something. I think it's much more exciting and adventurous to just realize there's more. It's an infinite universe. It's big. Why set limits on yourself? As a psychologist, I know that if you set limits on yourself, those limits will become true most of the time. So why set limits on yourself?

MISHLOVE: Charlie, this has been a very interesting discussion. We've moved from the fear and the guilt associated with self observation, to the powerful aspects -- to the creativity, to the enlarged sense of being. It's been a pleasure having that discussion with you, and seeing the range of possibilities, as well as some very practical techniques for self exploration.

TART: And observing myself as I talk about this, I see that I really feel like a kid all excited inside when I talk about it.

MISHLOVE: Charlie Tart, thank you very much for being with me.

TART: Thanks for creating the opportunity.

MISHLOVE: My pleasure.