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CHAPTER 3
Quiescence and
the New Introspection

This improved technique of introspection was of as much importance to my study of the Inner World as is the microscope and telescope to the study of the Outer World; it was the Columbus that revealed, ultimately, a whole new continent of experiences.

—ELMER GATES, Early writings

The first attempts to discover better methods of discovering and validating were thus an instinctive combination of all kinds of naive mental activities, with the introspective more accentuated than usual and with a more definite insight into the mind for a solution. The two most characteristic results were judgment training and experimental introspection.

Experimental introspection was thrust upon Gates quite early in life, not merely by circumstances but also by predilection and strong readings. He was often alone, completely alone. He sought the seclusion of his amateur workshop or the restful quiet of the woods and fields that he might uninterruptedly introspect, read, or rest. Frequently he remained motionless in a silent and dark woodland retreat several hours at a time, free from all outside disturbances, to follow introspectively even the

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most subtle changes in the states of consciousness. He was led by long and oft-repeated experience to practice regular periods of quiescent bodily repose to become aware more successfully of their characteristic finer differences, and thus was almost unintentionally led into those mental habits most conducive to introspection, and acquired while still young a very unusual skill.

Distractions of the introspective attention had to be overcome. He found that all bodily movements, all stimulations of the senses (whether noticed or not), and all spontaneous mental activities weakened the vividness, interrupted the continuity, and altered the quality of the introspection. Objective distractions were not difficult to overcome. The quiet of a properly regulated room removed nearly all environmental disturbances. As a boy, he had found the darkness, silence, and even temperature of a properly ventilated cave better and more useful. After his eyes and ears had become adapted, he was almost free from changes in objective

stimuli, for a constant and uniform stimulus soon becomes unnoticed, even though it still has its effects. He found it advantageous to practice always in the same place. The conscious mind thereby becomes accustomed to the peculiar character of the disturbances and finally stops noticing them. The subconscious does not become accustomed to them, however, being disturbed by much more minute influences.

Subjective spontaneities were not easily overcome. He practiced long and hard and in many ways, trying to secure freedom from such disturbances as involuntary movements; such distractions as attention to subjective sounds in the ears and light in the eyes, swallowing the saliva, respiration, the beating of the heart, organic feelings in the stomach and other organs, the rush of breath through the nostrils, the pressure on the body of clothes and of the chair upon which he sat, smells, tastes, temperatures. Still more distracting was the ever-recurring procession of images, ideas, emotions, sentiments, reminiscences, passing like an endless stream of phantoms through the mind, coming uncalled and departing unbidden. These annoyed him most.

All his best efforts were of little avail until he took advantage

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of the “great and important law that functional activities of the mind and body, if systematically and regularly repeated, soon form the habit of periodicity.” He practiced at the same time every day without intermission. Functional periodicity of quiescence was established as a habit at a certain hour daily, first for one kind of spontaneity and then for another. Just as one gets hungry or sleepy at a certain time, so he became quiescent automatically and subconsciously at that daily hour. By voluntarily directed and habitually enforced quiescence at a time when he was, as he emphasized, well rested, thoroughly recuperated, well slept and well nourished, he accomplished a quiescence of all the muscular and sensory functions and of the organic feelings, and thus removed, so far as possible, all disturbances of the attention so that he might successfully detect minute shades of differences in the mental processes that were introspected.

Muscular quiescence was accomplished by confining his attention solely to not allowing, even once, any movement. At first the sitting lasted fifteen, then thirty minutes daily, then one hour. The torso was poised vertically in the chair so as not to strain the muscles, with the arms and legs in an easy position. As this was the main work at that time, the “one business” of his life, he took for it the best part of the day, the noon hour, and practiced every day with punctilious exactness. The habit soon grew so strong that when the hour arrived he would, even if unaware of the time, feel

restful. After he had practiced about seven months, the muscles would remain quiet of their own accord. "That restless tendency to involuntary muscular activity which is so common to all people when ill at ease, or when first trying to stand or sit very still, had during that daily hour entirely disappeared."

Later in life Gates learned the psycho-physiology of this process. Inhibitive motor memories were recorded or enregistered in the brain, and they, like well-trained servants, subconsciously superintended the maintenance of quiescence, so that voluntary attention was no longer required. That area of the brain with motor memories had been so accustomed, during his former

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waking life, to uninterrupted and largely useless activity, that constant bodily motions became second nature or automatic. They were accompanied by innervations, sensations, and disturbances of the circulation, and apart from wasting vital energy, produced a concomitant activity in the brain and interfered with introspection. If the introspection were to be vivid, it should be undisturbed by any conscious state except the one it was introspecting. He noticed that during muscular quiescence he could more vividly and successfully introspect the sensations accompanying a muscular movement.

Sensory quiescence was attained in the same way, the different senses being trained one at a time. "If a light or noise is disturbing," he advises, "pay no attention to it and inhibit your consciousness from dwelling on it. I can not tell you how to do this, any more than how to move your arm, except that you do it by trying until you succeed. You must, for instance, have a notion of what is to be done, then intensely desire it and persistently will the inhibition of attention, and repeat the effort until it occurs. Remain aware, and aware that you are resting and inhibiting all mental work. If it does not occur, stop further effort. From the moment one is awake the sensory areas, like the leaves of the aspen tree in the wind, are habitually without a moment's rest, and they have been since birth. When introspecting, the senses should be completely quiet in the new quiescent sense, except the one being introspected, which should alone be active."

When the senses are thus rested, the blood supply, which habitually congests the cortical sensory areas and nerve-endings, diminishes and more blood and functional energy are free to be used by the higher areas. Gates found that smaller sensory differences could be discriminated, and the sense had certain phases and peculiarities that he had never before been able to notice.

Quiescence of organic feelings was also difficult. It was necessary to be free of pain or sensations in the bodily organs that make introspection difficult and imperfect. The organic feelings cannot easily be inhibited when they arise, nor should they, serving as warnings that should be heeded. By sufficient practice,

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however, they can be inhibited, if not too intense. But the proper way is to lead such a normal life that there will be no occasion for organic feelings to arise. These sensations should not be suppressed, but rather cultivated, and such a healthful life led that no cause for them arises. Normal quiescence is impossible without complete health.

Intellective quiescence was accomplished by the same methods to the inhibiting of spontaneous images, concepts, ideas, thoughts, reminiscences, and other such disturbances. Emotive quiescence was more difficult, especially during periods of worry or social excitement, but was accomplished with methods discovered later. Conative quiescence was the most difficult.

Anyone who has attempted this practice of quiescence, even only slightly, will appreciate this delightfully illuminating description of Elmer Gates’:

“After all this had been accomplished, during a little over two years effort, there still remained the most difficult part: to attain automatic inhibition of the spontaneous intellective and emotive activities. At any unexpected moment the quiescence is apt to be disturbed by some one of the various business or social interests knocking loudly at the front door of consciousness and ere the awareness or the subconsciousness has had time to inhibit it, the Attention, with insatiable curiosity, has opened wide the door and seated the unbidden guest. To get rid of this intrusive caller is not always easy—for he is persistent and engrossing and even when he has been ousted he leaves his influence behind. And if you do not answer the knock you are apt to feel that perhaps it is something important and ought to be attended to.

“The plans and duties and opportunities of the day, if they are not permitted to approach the front door, will shout in at the windows or calmly sit on the front steps and wait until you come out—and you know they are there, like a conscience, impatiently awaiting their opportunity. When you think you have effectually barricaded yourself against all these disturbances so the spontaneities of the intellect have either concluded to stay away or the attention no longer notices them, and you are about

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to congratulate yourself on your commendable ability to be ruler in your inner realm and crown yourself King of your own mind, then there suddenly steals into your consciousness the seductive light of some great love whose insuppressible radiance finds no barrier in closed eyelids or in automatic inhibition of muscular and intellectual states, and, ere you are aware, your breath comes quicker and your heart beats faster and the arena where you were about to introspect a voluntarily produced mental state is bathed in a luminescent glory that blots out everything else. Or, when you think that in the empire of your mind you are about to become Monarch of all you survey, then it is that the sky is sometimes almost instantly overcast with the oppressive gloom of some great grief whose black clouds blot out the very stars of hope and thunder out reverberations of woe that will seemingly forever echo in your soul. And sometimes again the recollection of some amusing incident or some sudden gust of resentment will ripple with incipient laughter or momentary anger the smooth sea whose surface is your only mirror in which to reflect the heavens above. The appetites and desires are easily kept quiescent by a normal life, and they are not apt to intrude uninvited.”

Change of environment to get into a wholly new set of influences and stimuli he found a necessary last step in preparation for successful introspection: otherwise certain peculiar conditions and influences of the habitual surroundings would be mistaken for normal and essential characteristics of his consciousness. Suggestions of the social atmosphere and local objective forces were mistaken for permanent mental states.

In this practice of quiescence Gates had none of the so-called occult reasons, such as “entering the mystic silence,” but did it to remove so far as possible all psycho-physical and physical obstacles and distractions to the best introspective working of his mind. “The virtue,” he noted, “does not lie in simply getting quiet, but depends wholly on what the mind does when it gets so good a chance.” The quiescence-training that gave a habit of inhibiting muscular spontaneities produced *physiologic rest*, while

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training of the intellectual, emotive, and conative spontaneities produced psychological quiescence. The term *quiescence* was used to distinguish it from ordinary rest, and was defined at that time as “the art of attaining functional equalization, rest, metabolic recuperation, and the art of inhibiting useless spontaneities.” Later his researches on the volitional factor of conation and the conscious factor of volition taught him “how to teach quiescence to involve no mystical elements.” But this erroneous interpretation

was always a concern of students. One student, Henry C. Houghton, M.D., professor of physiology and otology, New York Medical College, who had spent some time in Gates' laboratories at Chevy Chase, wrote to him as late as 1899:

“There is a large and increasing class of minds who will hail your book with glad words, will feed on it and find relief from starvation.... I can see that quiescence will be viewed in different ways; but it is so strong on the physical side, so like Delsarts in some shade, so in the line of ‘Menti-culture,’ and so true, that I can not see how it can be left out; but the danger of being classed with the ‘Eastern fakirs’ is so evident that you need to guard the practice by reasons of scientific sort.”

The description of quiescence herein follows Gates' latest explanation. One aspect he expressed quite vividly in this way:

“The inhibition of all useless voluntary and involuntary muscular and sensory activities—of purposeless intellections and impulses—soon became by force of periodicity, easy and more and more complete. Useless twitchings, rumblings, muscular and mental strains, brooding, worries, desires, imagings, were stopped. Evil and depressing emotional states were suppressed, and the pleasant ones correspondingly increased. The light of awareness was kept brightly burning, but the flickering flames of useless conscious states were turned down ever lower and lower until even the purposive processes were quiescent. If completely successful, the body feels like a statue inhabited, not by special

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senses and feelings, but by a pervading body-feeling (somatosis); the whole cerebral cortex (which is anatomically connected with all parts of the body) sends libero-motor and metabolic and circulatory and other nervous influences to all parts of the body at once, thus equalizing the vaso-motor irregularities of the blood circulation due to one-sided activities and specialized habits of work. The areas of the brain and body that have day by day been accustomed to prolonged activity, and which during night have been the center for dreams, have thus become permanently over congested with blood, but during this quiescence have a chance to rest and recuperate because the blood is withdrawn and spread throughout the whole body almost uniformly. In ordinary life at all times certain organs, or motor areas, or intellectual or emotive areas, are habitually (by reason of the vocation or trade of the person) hyperemic and their states dominant in consciousness, and other unused structures are anemic; i.e., there is an unequal distribution of functional activity in the organism, and this leads to

an atrophic disuse of some structures and a hypertrophic growth of others, which when long persisted in produces disease. But quiescence relieves the irregularity and permits rest and recuperation. During the quiescence there occurs a metabolic manufacture of vital energy that otherwise would not have been made; and this energy is distributed more uniformly over the body, and the surplus is stored for future use. Only during complete rest does this take place in the cells of the body. Few people ever rest completely. They may spend enough time doing nothing, but they do not properly rest.

“This practice soon forms a habit of making bodily motions and mental activities only when there is a purpose. The period of quiescence forms a habit that gradually extends in its influence beyond that hour and relieves the mind of its multitudinous, harmful, spontaneous agitations. It conduces to continuous and regulated mental functioning. In many ways it secures anatomic and psychologic growth, removes wrong habits, forms correct bodily positions, relieves abnormal muscular and mental tensions and nervousness and wrong vaso-motor dominancies. It allows

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an opportunity for the action of those subtler and more uniform influences belonging to the inherent or immanent nature of the mind and promotes the functional growth according to the needs of the mind’s activity undeterred by abnormal or unduly accentuated habits. It allows the normal nervous stimuli regulating growth to act equally upon all structures and functional activities. The special memories of some trade or profession and the special cortical dominancies belonging to particular occupations, no longer so completely determine and monopolize the course of cerebral growth, but the whole nature of the mind begins to act upon the whole organism in which it is embodied.”

Gates noticed that he was gradually becoming healthier, and his consciousness becoming more vivid and clear. His health was largely due to regular habits of eating, sleeping, and working, and to the congeniality of his occupation, but it was nevertheless profoundly influenced by the perfectly rested condition in which his mind kept itself. The high state of health in turn augmented intensity of consciousness, power of attention, depth of emotion, and energy of will.

He worked hard every day—often for several months he kept at hard physical labor—but he made it a point that if his mind felt fatigue from, for instance, seven hours’ work, he would rest; and next day he could perhaps labor seven and a half hours before feeling fatigue. By gradually increasing the severity and length of the daily task, he found that he could often labor fifteen hours

without feeling fatigue. As a rule his mind secured for itself sound and dreamless sleep, was well rested, kept its body properly clad and well nourished; nevertheless, its highest exuberance of health and most vivid consciousness was experienced only after it had for several months regularly practiced that more perfect and equable kind of energy-creating rest that he technically termed quiescence.

Introspective experimentation with his conscious states by making them act upon each other—this study of subjective states acting on subjective states, of what hindered or promoted new ideas—soon led to so regulating his life that he would

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always have plenty of surplus vital energy, beyond that required for ordinary activities, for the very best mentative results. He found that by practicing quiescence regularly at the same hour daily and then devoting the remainder of the day to intellectual work, this systematic tendency soon became habitual, and the organism expected and prepared for it. A daily mentative periodicity and a higher mental capacity were produced shortly afterward. The other functions being quiet, it became the mind's habit to be more fully awake and aware. Sleep is apt to be disturbed by dreams; and anyway he found it did not produce the kind of intellectual rest that quiescence did. Not only was the power of introspection slowly augmented, but a more effective intellectual dominancy was established during the remainder of the day; the higher mental processes tended to become dominant over the lower. All related psychological and physiological functionings were augmented, he learned, with increased respiration, circulation, and metabolism; and the subconscious processes gave evidence of readiness. All dominancies of consciousness and of vasomotor blood supply connected with other kinds of functioning subsided, and the whole mind and body were given over completely to the support of that process which habit said must occur at that periodicity. The result was an augmentation of every phase of that activity. There was no physiological inertia, but a readiness.

In a similar manner the mind got ready for its introspective practice after each period of quiescence, constituting not merely a periodicity of quiescence but also a periodicity of introspection.

These periodicities favored the acquisition of automatic skill. A functional habit could thereafter be more quickly and completely established. He found abundant proof in many ways; for instance, if a musical periodicity had been once formed for a certain hour, it was not easy to do mathematical work during that period. Moreover, for some time after practice had been abandoned, new

musical or mathematical ideas would occur oftener during their former periods.

Gates could not vividly introspect an active mental state

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when there was any slight degree of fatigue of the activity producing it; or when there was general fatigue; or when conative strains were simultaneously in the mind. Regarding this last difficulty, he found that all kinds of consciously-noticed and subconsciously-felt organic, muscular, or sensory stimuli produced a sort of glowing or hazy foreground semi-consciousness through which the introspected state had to be “seen”; that the habitual daily mental activities produced a sort of glowing background against which the state could not be distinctly introspected. In addition, the mind would frequently be engaged upon a mental process, as yet partly or wholly subconscious, which in a few hours or days would result in some new idea, insight, or bit of creative work, or some new emotive craving or leading; that is, the mind was parturient with some new conception and about to give birth to some new step in its growth. This produced a brain-strain and a sort of fore glow in consciousness that was apt to be mistaken for a quality of the state introspected. On the other hand, a mental activity that had just stopped a few hours or days ago, especially if of great interest or intensity, left an afterglow in consciousness that tinted with its own hues every introspective scene.

It was not easy to overcome these hindrances. “There were,” Gates pointed out, “no guidebooks to follow, no Baedeker of the introspective world. No precedents had been established, no guideposts set up by predecessors. I was entering alone into a new region, wholly unaware of the kinds of dangers or opportunities. I had to learn by doing it. I had to do it first and find out how afterwards. After many successive expedients, I finally found that to get a clear arena, unencumbered with uninvited guests—so the invited mental states might come out, like gladiators one or two at a time, and perform for my introspection—it was necessary to attain what I called psychological and physiological quiescence.

“It is not a fad,” he emphasized, “not ‘sitting in the silence for concentration.’ It is serious work for earnest students. The novelty will soon wear off, unless indeed it is kept up until the real

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novelties of originative mentation commence; and then the wonders of the Arabian Nights sink into insignificance as compared with the new world of your own mind which is by far more marvelous than the Seven Wonders of the objective world. A world in which you alone can enter, and only by means of your

own consciousness manifesting introspectively. You will be well repaid for the trouble if you succeed, and in that empire you will find all the possibilities of your nature. Nothing can ever come to you except it come to your consciousness. But first you must still the Babel of spontaneities before you can truly hear; you must subdue the flickering and the confused glimmering before you can see; you must control your functionings and suppress the anarchy of your spontaneities before you can become King of your own subjective domain. And to rule yourself (that is, to rule your Person by your Self), is greater than to rule the world.”

A whole new world of subjective states was revealed. When the mind’s customary activities have subsided, spontaneities have been temporarily suppressed, and the introspected processes and states have become more vivid, then it is that the less usual and more fundamental and seldom noticed states become more distinct and can be better introspected.

Gates offered this word of caution: no abnormal pupil should attempt to practice quiescence. No one should attempt it who is not well grounded in objective science and the scientific methods of physical and psychological research; nor without being under the supervision of a competent medical man who is also a psychologist, for most persons are unfitted by nature for this line of research. Only those fitted to become specialists should try.

Gates had discovered an important new method and technique, which he called the New Introspection, destined to be of utmost practical value to all his further work. One of the ways in which his study of introspection differed from that of his predecessors was that he first prepared by attaining the habit of quiescence. Another was his study of the effects of bodily conditions and environment and their practical regulation.