The Evolving Network

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Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, there is now confidence to face new challenges with energy, resourcefulness and open minds, as did our founders, realising that though outward forms must always change, the inner foundation and aims of the Network remains secure.

Science, in the 1960s, did little to help the understanding of consciousness. Science deals with the primary qualities of Galileo – the material world – but it excludes the secondary qualities: 'red' is only a wavelength, 'love' is just the product of hormones, not a feeling. These higher qualities excluded by Galilean science are the ones we are interested in in the Network, but they cannot be discussed without understanding consciousness. Despite the brilliant work of Sherrington and Hughlings Jackson on the central nervous system in the early 20th century, defining pathways and levels within the brain, and that of Penfield in the mid-20th century who implanted electrodes in the brains of patients with epilepsy, it became clear to me that science alone could not lead to a full understanding of consciousness. For I found ideas relating to a progression and expansion of consciousness were never discussed in medical literature, where at that time even the word consciousness was banned. ('Level of alertness' was the term we used then).

In the last thirty years the world has hugely changed. In one way it has been changed by a vast explosion in technology affecting every area of our lives and our thinking. Communications science has developed to allow everyone free, instant world-wide video communication with no special equipment other than a computer. No group need now be isolated; time and space themselves have changed. Since the 1990s the discoveries in neuroscience with the advent of widespread neuroimaging have been very far-reaching so that we now understand to a much greater extent how the brain really works. One of the most recent findings is the plasticity of the brain and its capacity to change and develop, in every one of us. For example, both the long-term and recently blind have been shown to use all the processing power in that area of the brain which in sighted people is devoted to vision to increase the power of other senses such as feeling and hearing, so that, for example, Braille can be learned more easily and sounds produce a three dimensional world. We're now also beginning to understand the areas of the brain which are affected by meditation. Even more important than that, there are now many studies showing that meditation can improve one's health, help relationships by allowing one to be more calm and focused, and lead to experiences of a part of one's nature one never knew existed. Meditators' brains enlarge in the frontal region, an area which regulates emotional responsiveness. Hence, meditators tend to be less anxious and cope better with stressful situations than non-meditators. Further evidence also suggests that the extent of these changes depends on the number of years of meditation. As long ago as the 1970s, a paper was published in a respected peer-reviewed scientific journal, showing that meditators produced a 'meditational field' which could be detected by other meditators over 1500 miles away.

There is now growing support for a newly emerging technology of enlightenment, using methods of mindfulness meditation, employing structures in the brain which have been recognised and defined by neuroscience. Mindfulness meditation has spread widely into medicine and is producing significant results in health care. New understanding of how the brain works has given rise to the concept that there may be a technology – i.e. science-based practical techniques – which can lead more directly to altered and permanent states of consciousness. There appear to be two major systems in the brain, one which looks after the 'I, me, mine' egoic system of the brain, and one which looks after 'the other' – the objects 'out there'. Mindfulness appears to reduce the functioning of the egoic system until, after years of practice, these egoic structures may collapse, directly revealing wider and finer states of consciousness. There is little doubt that the training of attention and the refinement of the emotional centres which are centrally involved in this process help lead to this crucial collapse of the ego and the manifestation of higher states of consciousness. Even more exciting, there are at long last the beginnings of theories which suggest that brain function is only a small component of the nature of a human being. These ideas suggest that the concept of the soul, i.e. a vehicle that has direct access to wider states of consciousness and may survive brain death, is being seriously considered.

It has become entirely clear that the only instrument for measuring consciousness is the human mind itself and that the refinement of the human mind which leads to wider states of consciousness is the way that science must go. Further, if science is to focus on these new levels of consciousness and accept that brain function is only a small part of human potential, the scientist of the future should himself practise consciousness-expanding techniques so as to experience these different levels of consciousness at first hand.

Recently, a survey carried out by a post-graduate student for a doctoral thesis has identified people who have reported a permanent expansion of consciousness. Sometimes this has occurred after a crisis in life or, in others, after a period of "seeking". The commonly reported factor is the collapse of the egoic function and the shining through of universal consciousness. Rupert Spira is one person who shows this possibility.

What is the aim of the Network today? In a nutshell, to foster the growth and development of consciousness within every individual. Clearly, the Network has now not only an opportunity but also a pressing need to change and grow in order to meet the understanding and expectations of the present generation. On this foundation I would like to see a greater interaction and integration between consciousness and science, consciousness and art, consciousness and music and consciousness and loving care for each other. Already the Network has had several outstanding conferences in this area and I feel we have a great opportunity to develop it even further.

Let us remember the enormous contribution to the Network of our founders, and the incalculable debt owed by all of us who have come under their influence. This memory, faithfully held, will carry us forward into a new period of enthusiasm, hard work and the expansion of consciousness, always with the guiding principles of love and compassion.

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