

A STORY ABOUT OBSERVATION

From *The Act of Will* by Roberto Assagioli, MD, pp 25-26

An interesting anecdote illustrating the point is told by Ramacharaka in his book *Raja -Yoga*. He speaks of the famous naturalist Agassiz and his method of training pupils:

His pupils became renowned for their close powers of observation and perception, and their consequent ability to "think" about the things they had seen. Many of them rose to eminent positions, and claimed that this was largely by reason of their careful training.

The tale runs that a new student presented himself to Agassiz one day, asking to be set to work. The naturalist took a fish from a jar in which it had been preserved, and laying it before the young student, bade him observe it carefully, and be ready to report upon what he had noticed about the fish. The student was then left alone with the fish. There was nothing especially interesting about that fish—it was like many other fishes that he had seen before. He noticed that it had fins and scales, and a mouth and eyes, yes, and a tail. In a half-hour he felt certain that he had observed all about the fish that there was to be perceived. But the naturalist remained away.

The time rolled on, and the youth, having nothing else to do, began to grow restless and weary. He started out to hunt up the teacher, but he failed to find him, and so had to return and gaze again at that wearisome fish. Several hours had passed, and he knew but little more about the fish than he did in the first place.

He went out to lunch, and when he returned it was still a case of watching the fish. He felt disgusted and discouraged, and wished he had never come to Agassiz, who, it seemed, was a stupid old man after all—one way behind the times. Then, in order to kill time, he began to count the scales. This completed, he counted the spines of the fins. Then he began to draw a picture of the fish. In drawing the picture he noticed that the fish had no eyelids. He thus made the discovery that as his teacher had expressed it often, in lectures, "a pencil is the best of eyes." Shortly after the teacher returned, and after ascertaining what the youth had observed, he left rather disappointed, telling the boy to keep on looking and maybe he would see something.

This put the boy on his mettle, and he began to work with his pencil, putting down little details that had escaped him before, but which now seemed very plain to him. He began to catch the secret of observation. Little by little he brought to light new objects of interest about the fish. But this did not suffice his teacher, who kept him at work on the same fish for three whole days. At the end of that time the student really knew something about the fish, and, better than all, had acquired the "knack" and habit of careful observation and perception in detail.

Years after, the student, then attained to eminence, is reported as saying: "That was the best zoological lesson I ever had—a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy that the professor left to me, as he left to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, and with which we cannot part."

