

Text from the Tradition: A Taste of Water by Chwen Jiuan Lee and Thomas Hand

Mindfulness and Attention (text drawn from pp. 201, 194, 190-192, 202-203)

Mindfulness demands the bringing together of all the powers of our human composite. The oldest ascetical term describes it perfectly as re-collection. The first and extremely important preliminary step is bodily relaxation. Full attention is then given to some concrete life action such as breathing, walking, etc. This means that mindfulness always implies a simplification of the object of attention. This object is always here and now. Even in the memory of some event of Christ's life, often with visualization, the act of memory and visualization is one's present action. The attention is single minded. It lays aside all thought of purpose or goal and all judgments and comparisons. It is without any preoccupation or concern. In a word, it is bare attention and nothing more.

This radical simplification of attention is essential in order to progress into it, and eventually through, formless awareness to spirit consciousness. When we are completely focused on one thing or no-thing, we are moving ourselves out of relational consciousness. All relational, categorical thinking demands two points to establish the relationship. Bare attention to only one point or object will produce a state in which that point itself disappears, because there is nothing left for it to relate to. Formless consciousness is all that remains.

If we are to actually rise from self-consciousness to super consciousness, practice is the only path. The one practice above all that can activate the great evolutionary force within us is attention. What you put your attention to happens. And it happens according to the manner of attention. Pure, single minded attention infallibly brings actualization. And if our minding, our attention is distracted, mixed up, fuzzy and pulled in contradictory directions, nothing will happen. There is deep truth in the following example. Say that 10 people go on a picnic and that one of them is deathly afraid of snakes. This very fear keeps the person attentive to and looking for snakes everywhere. The result is that the one who runs into a snake is this person, this fearful attentiveness.

The only object worthy of our full and total attention is life itself. We all want to really live, to be fully and gloriously alive. In fact, that is what life is all about. Since actualization of a power is brought about through attention, the only thing that merits our absolute and unalloyed attention is the life-force itself, the Spirit, the *yin-yang* movement of chi. This will bring us to life. Furthermore, what is of supreme practical importance is that, concretely speaking, this means attention to our own here-and-now living, our individual Tao. It means being fully aware of actions like breathing, sitting, eating, walking, talking, etc. In everything, being aware is being alive. To be fully aware is to be fully alive.

The ever urgent journey up the ladder of consciousness can begin anywhere. If you are practicing breath mindfulness, pause to breathe with bare attention. The same with walking or any other focal point. But pausing to enter mindfulness is very well extended to anything that happens in your day—to eating, drinking during a coffee break, hearing a bird, looking at the child playing, feeling a cool breeze. The result will be that gradually you will extend this single minded attention to whatever you are doing.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Today's treatment of mindfulness and attention from the lens of "Christianity from Taoist-Buddhist Eyes," which is the subtitle of Lee and Hand's book, reminds me of Evelyn Underhill's presentation of the same topic. All three authors, Lee, Hand and Underhill, point to the concept of "simplification," to describe the disciplined process of learning to focus the attention and its subsequent fruits of moderation, less busyness, and more peace in daily life. A disciplined commitment to simplification is necessary in a complex and often over-stimulating world in which many of us feel that our attention is too often frayed, divided, and scattered.

We tend to see and feel in sets of two, or opposites, which Hand and Lee call relational consciousness, supported by categorial thinking. So much, black and white, back and forth, up and down, man and woman, rich and poor. However, reality is much more complex than this or that, now or then. Another well-known contemporary teacher, Richard Rohr, often refers to the concept of non-dual consciousness as an antidote to dualistic, either/or mindsets. When we attempt to see a multi-valent reality through dualistic lenses, the result is a pervasive sense of feeling torn, stretched, and ill-at-ease. Underhill describes this state as two-ness, a constant state of feeling divided. Intentional spiritual practice, the disciplined honing of attention, helps to open our seeing to the fullness of life. When we tune into and align with the fullness (rather than the two-ness) we can be more at-ease, assured, and strong in the present moment. Slowly and over time, an ordering of our attention, also gives order to our lives, our daily rhythms, our social structures and so on...

Questions for Reflection:

- How do you distinguish between the singleness of simplification and the two-ness of dualism?
- What is the object or activity toward which you direct your attention?
- From your experience, what fruits have emerged in your daily life as an extension of your practice?