

Attention in Service of Presence

What is the faculty of attention? It could almost be said that a human being *is* attention. Whatever occupies our attention-whether inwardly or outwardly, whether profound or trivial-is what we are at that moment. Therefore, if we are attentive only to the outer world, we forfeit our own inner life. We need not only attention, but balance-balance between the narrow and the wide, the outer and the inner, the material and the spiritual...

The study of attention is also the study of the ego and the essential Self. One of the qualities of the ego is that it has little attention of its own; instead, its attention is captured and compelled by what it likes and dislikes. The awakened Self, on the other hand, can direct and sustain attention...

Presence allows us to notice how and when attention is caught and how to free it again. As we begin to see what compels our attention and why, we also weaken the tyranny of the ego and begin to create an impartial observer.

In our inner world we can learn to notice identification-the involuntary and unconscious absorption of our attention in inner processes...Free attention is a power of the soul that throws light on whatever it meets. It develops when the soul begins to give itself out through its attention. At first it may require great and systematic efforts to be developed...

The source of attention is outside of time, but under the temporal conditions in which the human mind usually functions, attention is disturbed and dispersed. If we are truly gathered at the center of our own being, higher energies of our psyche are able to organize the lower energies and lend them a coherence they in themselves lack. But, at the same time, the lower energies (all the impacts of environment and conditioning) are able to disorganize the higher ones and introduce into them something of the incoherence of the lower levels. Out of this dynamic comes the struggle to keep our attention on something...

The inner world includes thoughts emotions and subtler psychic impressions. With presence we can overcome our unconscious identification with these processes and know ourselves as we are...Presence allows a two way attention that is the essence of relationship and communication. With this two-way attention we can be simultaneously aware of our inner state and the state of another...

We can also attend with a wide or a narrow focus...This is the joy of being fully human, of taking responsibility for the capacity of our own attention. Gradually we learn to sustain a focus with steadiness and continuity, with patience and interest. We should be able to construct an intentional image or maintain a state of receptivity. This observing stabilizes itself as an inner presence. This stable inner presence then becomes a source and ground of attention itself...

As we begin to develop an independent attention, one that can look outward and inward at the same time, we begin to acquire the presence that is the enabling factor of all spiritual work.

The training of the attention is a necessary part of our spiritual training. It is an essential factor in the mind spiritualizing itself, in the development of the soul. Eventually, attention may become luminous and creative. It directs the power of the soul. As we consciously give our attention to others-to creative acts and service-we are also giving of our soul, and this is how the soul grows.

Questions for Reflection:

- How do you understand or conceive of the human soul, and how does it show up in your practice?
- Most teachers suggest that practicing attention in meditation helps to develop its use in daily life. What have you observed about your capacity for attention in meditation and/or daily life?
- Practically speaking, what keeps you from holding your attention when you want to?