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Attention

Fine-tuning Your Awareness

Attention is like a searchlight; when its beam is spread over a vast area, its power to focus on a particular object becomes weak, but focused on one thing at a time, it becomes powerful.

PARAMAHANSA YOGANANDA

THE SUCCESS OF THE legendary detective Sherlock Holmes was due in large part to his extraordinary perceptiveness. Where others saw nothing unusual, he noticed tiny but important clues that gave him a remarkable ability to solve mysteries. That same quality of attentiveness can be developed, and it can prove just as valuable in helping you find clues to what makes a successful life.

Such awareness includes noticing details of ordinary behavior, other people's as well as your own. You've probably known at least a few people who typically seemed to be totally present. You felt like they truly listened to you and saw you, without being distracted by anyone or anything else. And you probably felt good about being heard and seen without that person's agenda intruding. By contrast, most of us, as we listen, are continually distracted by our own thoughts and feelings. We filter another person's messages through the lenses of our own reactions. As a result, often we're not quite all there with each other. The psychological approach called phenomenology is based on this fact. Its focus is on learning how to get as close as we can to hearing and understanding another person's reality *as it is for them*.

Something similar happens with our own thoughts. We start to think about something, then find ourselves distracted by worries about tomorrow or memories of yesterday—or fifteen years ago. In this case, we're not quite all there with ourselves.

Like Sherlock Holmes, as you learn to recognize and guide what you are doing with your attention, you become better able to perceive what's going on inside you and around you. That gives you more power to choose what you do, and to affect how others respond to you, making it easier for you to create harmony in your life. You do this by detailing one part of your mind to notice what the rest of your mind, emotions, and body are doing.

In yogic writings, this internal observer is often called the “Witness.” When you tune in to your inner Witness, try to observe elements of your experience that sometimes escape your attention. Notice thoughts that slip through your mind like ghosts, almost unseen. Be attuned to feelings and sensations that would ordinarily have remained below the threshold of your consciousness. Instead of letting your mind drift on winds of fretful and forgetful wanderings, you can harness its power with the reins of focused attention. Psychologist and philosopher William James declared, “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention . . . is the very root of judgment, character, and will.”¹

YOUR MIND FUNCTIONS WITHIN A CIRCLE OF ATTENTION

Modern psychologists and ancient sages alike have verified these facts: The mind has a limited capacity for attention. The attention you give to selected items is less available for noticing other items. Focusing your attention in certain directions increases your satisfaction, happiness, and peace of mind, while focusing it in certain other directions causes unnecessary and avoidable pain and suffering. Developing your ability to notice what your mind is doing increases your freedom to focus your mind in ways that are helpful rather than harmful to both yourself and others.

Psychological research shows that people can respond to and remember only a limited number of items at a time, even though we have a huge capacity to remember past events. Imagine for a moment that an empty circle represents your total capacity for attention. Next, suppose that half of your circle of attention is taken up by worrying about how an important meeting tomorrow will go, or how “that important someone” will respond to you. Draw a line down the middle of the circle and darken one side. That half of your mind is occupied.

This leaves only half of your attention available to notice other items or to think about other matters. In a sense, you're a half-wit, since you have only half your wits about you to deal with what you are doing now. This can

occur, for instance, when a student has severe test anxiety. Some of his attention is taken up with worry about how he's going to do on the exam, and as a result he has less attention available to focus on thinking and writing. Fear of failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Something similar can happen in a job interview, during a business presentation, or on a first date.

Think of a job such as air-traffic controller, which requires a high degree of sustained, focused attention. The controller has to notice every blip on the radar screen. A few moments of daydreaming could lead to a plane crash.

But perhaps you are thinking, *That doesn't apply to me. I can keep my attention perfectly focused if I want to.*

Really? As an experiment, stop reading for just one minute and try this:

JUST ONE MINUTE

Look at a clock or a watch that has a second hand. Your task is to keep your attention from wandering for sixty seconds.

No problem! you are perhaps telling yourself.

Well, let's find out. During the next minute, each time you notice that your mind has wandered off and you are thinking about anything else at all, count that incident. Then bring your attention back to your clock or watch. Try it now.

How many times did your attention wander?

You probably counted at least four or five instances of mental wandering. That's during just one minute. We think we're in charge of what our minds are doing, but in reality they're out of control much of the time. You're about to change that.

ONE-POINTED AND MANY-POINTED ATTENTION

A calligraphy student was writing the words *The First Principle*. He wrote them again and again. Each time his teacher pointed out some flaw. The student's mind was divided between writing the letters, concern about whether he was doing them well enough, and worry about what the teacher would think. Finally, the teacher, sensing the student's self-conscious discomfort, left the room for a few moments.

Ah, now's my chance! thought the student. In the teacher's absence, he wrote the three words one more time. The teacher returned: "Perfect!"

While the teacher was present, the student's attention was many-pointed,

darting back and forth among diverse thoughts and anxieties. With the teacher gone, he could focus completely on the task. His attention became one-pointed. Similarly, an expert musician, when “in the zone,” will be focused on nothing but performing. Each time she notices that her mind has drifted off and the singing or playing has gone on autopilot, she’ll bring her attention back, which allows her to put more skill, depth, and feeling into the session.

This ability to guide your attention to where you want it to go is invaluable. It can help you think, talk about, or do what you truly prefer to do, instead of what someone else, a magazine ad, or a TV commercial wants you to do. As you get better at recognizing when your attention gets hooked, you develop the freedom to unhook. Then you can respond in a flexible way that fits your present needs and wishes.

In doing that, you are developing your ability to maintain one-pointed attention: to focus on just one thing at a time. In our everyday consciousness, our attention is forever darting around among competing thoughts, sensations, emotions, and perceptions—often in a distracted and chaotic fashion. Sometimes you may even feel like you’re caught in a mental vortex of thoughts that you can’t escape. You might feel like your mind is spinning out of control. Perhaps it is! For the most part, each new meditation in the first half of the Matrix of Consciousness requires just a little more attention and leaves you with just a little less distracted mental energy. When you reach the last step, it’s likely that you won’t be able to meditate and be distracted at the same time. You will be completely present in the moment.

CONCENTRATION AND MINDFULNESS WORK TOGETHER

You can’t always change an old habit just by programming yourself to act differently. Sometimes you have to discover the details of what you are doing that interferes with changing. Only when you can clearly perceive what you’re already doing can you choose to do something else.

Meditation opens an empty space in your mind where there are fewer distractions than usual. This makes it easier to notice old patterns and release them. A meditative voyage of inner discovery can sometimes lead to unexpected realizations that bring dramatic changes almost overnight.

Like everyone, you have at least two distinct kinds of awareness. The first is a broad sensitivity to whatever you happen to notice. The second is

a sharper focus on what you're attending to at a given moment. Such *bare attention*² includes two elements. One is an ability to concentrate—to focus your attention where you want it. The second is your ability to notice whatever is going on right now, both within and without. For example, as you watch a sunset, your mind may be filled with so many thoughts that you barely see it. But if you've developed a capacity for bare attention, you will first notice that you are not quite in the moment, and then let go of thinking about other things long enough to enjoy the blazing light in the sky as the sun sinks into the horizon. How delicious!

Concentration means placing or keeping your attention where you want it. It is sometimes misunderstood to mean “pushing things you don't want to think about out of your mind,” which in itself is difficult, as shown by the instruction, “Don't think about watermelons.” If you are trying to not think about something, you are still thinking about it. Actually, in concentration you focus your attention on an item, process, or subject. When you notice that your attention has wandered elsewhere, you gently pick it up and bring it back to where you want it.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the first to bring Eastern meditative practices to the West, defines concentration as a state that exists when you focus your mind on one object, either inside you or outside you, and keep it there. This need not mean that no other thoughts come through your mind. Rather, when they enter, you notice them, and then let them go while you retain your focus on the single object of your concentration. An ability to center your mind in this way leads to a great increase in mental control. Your mind becomes steady and almost unshakable, no longer darting here and there in response to internal or external stimuli.³

“In concentration,” says Yogic Master Swami Rama, “the goal is not to make the mind empty, but rather to quiet the mind by giving it a single focus. . . . This is in contrast to a scattered, distracted state of mind. Concentration means an alert, yet relaxed, focus of attention, and if you are relaxed and comfortable, this kind of concentration should not be difficult. When you cannot concentrate, it means your ability to choose to direct the flow of your mind has been impaired.”⁴

Indian yogi and guru Paramahansa Yogananda adds, “By the power of concentration, man can use the untold power of the mind to accomplish that which he desires.”

Mindfulness means noticing where your attention is and what it's doing from moment to moment. You can be mindful of your thoughts, feelings,

sensations, perceptions, or overt actions. We could say that you are mindful of events in your environment, or that you are mindful of yourself perceiving those events. You notice what you are doing, as you do it. Then you can move your attention back to what's most useful or satisfying: that's concentration again. Using your concentration and mindfulness together makes it easier to be attentive to what's useful to you and ignore what's not, or even to guide a conversation in a given direction when you need to do so.

At about the same time that Socrates was teaching people how to distinguish between what they truly knew and what they only thought they knew, the Buddha formulated his Noble Eightfold Path to reduce suffering. He described a profound insight: about a third of the suffering in human life is inevitable, but we ourselves create the rest of it—the other two-thirds. We can learn to stop doing that.

Suppose you and a friend are talking about a project that you're working on together, when suddenly you hear your inner voice saying, *We'll never get through this. I'm supposed to know what to do and I don't. I bet she thinks I'm a dunce!* Once you have noticed that negative self-talk (which is sometimes almost unconscious), you can change it. You might replace it with a statement asserting that if you persevere, the two of you will figure out what to do. Then you can channel the mental energy you were wasting on negativity into constructive thinking about how to successfully complete the project.

Rhonda Byrne's best-selling book, *The Secret*, says something similar but frames it differently: "Everything that's coming into your life you are attracting . . . by virtue of the images you're holding in your mind. . . . Why people do not have what they want is because they are thinking more about what they *don't* want than what they *do* want."⁵ Let's change Byrne's language slightly: what comes into your life you are attracting by virtue of what you pay attention to. Or in the words of Transcendental Meditation teacher Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: "Whatever we put our attention on will grow stronger in our life."

Actually we don't attract *everything* that happens to us. Sometimes fate plays its hand. Unexpected events do happen, occasionally with effects that we would never have anticipated. And in situations where inevitably one party wins and the other loses, both may vividly visualize success but only one wins. In a football game, what might have been a perfect field goal kick may be blown off course by a sudden gust of wind. Even then, how-

ever, the kicker is in charge of how he responds to the hand that fate just dealt, and in charge of what he does next.

But perhaps you are getting impatient with all this talk about how the mind works. You may be thinking, *You said this approach integrates both the mind and heart. Where's the heart?*

Where indeed? Let's see if we can find it.