

Mindfulness and Attention

Immortality has neither beginning nor ending. It is not something to be gained or to be lost. It is not attained in a vicarious manner. It is not the result of being conventionally good. It has little or nothing to do with the death of one's body. All the Great Teachers tell us that we are immortal beings or souls, that our primary mission is to discover or, as Plato teaches "remember or recollect" this essential Nature of our selves. If we are immortal, how then do we come to remember or to realize it? And how do we do this existentially and not merely on the level of belief? Further, how do we come to realize that its essential Nature is Wisdom, Love, and Compassion, or, to use the ancient Hindu denotation "Being-Consciousness-Bliss"?

We must begin, perhaps, by realizing that our sense of who we are has developed largely since birth and as the result of all of our experiences thus far. Additionally, we can notice that, fundamentally, our notion of who we are is dependent upon a more or less conscious identification with a name and a form that has had these experiences. Thus, we see our selves as separate from one another, from nature, and usually see our minds as separate from our bodies. We may, further, believe in a typically nebulous aspect of our selves called the soul. Being identified with a body, we naturally assume the reality of what its senses reveal. Thus, our sense of reality is largely externalized, even regarding our selves.

This sense of our selves, of others and of reality is, in Platonic language, comparable to unconsciously mistaking shadows for realities. Thus, our sense of reality is misleading to the extreme, resulting in the nature of the world in which we find our selves, a Hobbesian world of "man against man," a life which is "nasty, brutish, and short." Our meanings are, in fact, assigned: they are not discovered. Of course, for most of us they are the result of our acculturation, rather than the result of our own clear thinking and choosing. Raghavan Iyer teaches that one way of defining human beings is as "reality-assigning beings." Whatever it is that impresses itself upon our five senses does not come packaged, and labeled. In this sense, language primarily nouns can be a double-edged sword, especially if we are not aware that meanings, that so-called realities are assigned. To most of us reality diminishes in terms of space and time the farther away, the less real, the closer to us, the more real. It is a startling moment when one

Mindfulness and Attention

realizes that each person's reality is as real as one's own, in spite of the differences. Each person's sense of self is as real as one's own.

Karma permitting, one may arrive at a moment in life when the thought comes: there's got to be more to life, to reality, than this. This could be called a "golden moment." At such a moment one can choose the human prerogative of becoming a true seeker, a true learner from life. The ancients and many Teachers since have taught that the first step on the Path is to suspend, without becoming dysfunctional, all one thinks one knows. This requires a rigorous and objective examination of one's views and the assumptions that such views require. This is not the work of a day, or, perhaps lifetimes, but, as Krishna teaches in the Bhagavad-Gita: "It is difficult, but it can be done." This suspension of what one thinks one knows qualifies, according to Socrates, as "the beginning of Wisdom." It is further taught that in this process one should not try to square what one is learning with the prevailing world-views of one's culture.

Buddha's First Noble Truth is "there is suffering." One's poignant, initial awareness that there must be more to reality than meets the eye could be seen as a form of divine discontent or suffering. Thus, suffering need not always be construed in a negative manner. One of Dostoevsky's characters tells his younger brother: "Wisdom comes only through suffering." Krishna, Buddha and Jesus, to mention only three, all teach that the seeker must come to terms with, to use Krishna's words, "birth, sickness, old age, decay, death, and error." To meditate upon these inevitable aspects of human existence, no one excluded, is the first step upon the Path. Without this step one may well find one's self in make believe seemingly spiritual states of consciousness. Any true awakening must take these variables into account. Thus, the quest to answer the question: what more is there? is to ask what lays beyond these various modes of suffering? All the Great Teachers have taught that the answer to such questions must be found within one's self.

What is it within that will give respite from the suffering? What is the cause of this suffering? If we sit quietly and look within, we will discover the many, ever changing facets of our mind, governed largely by likes and dislikes: desires and aversions. The Buddha taught that, simply put, the cause of the suffering lies in "having

Mindfulness and Attention

what we do not want, wanting what we do not have.” There is no third alternative. Thus, suffering is the product of want, which in Sanskrit is called *tanha*, usually translated as grasping. This is so deeply embedded in our natures so as to be the reason for our taking birth. It is the desire for sentient existence, for sensation. It is interesting to note that most people put into a sensory deprivation chamber that deprives one of sensations usually ask to be let out within five minutes because they cannot stand the lack of sensation. On the other hand, those advanced in meditation find no need to be so released. The particular life into which we are born is said to be the product of causes arising from our desires and subsequent actions in previous incarnations.

We have, then, an exercise we can do next time we are distressed. We can ask our selves, do I have something I do not want, or do I want something I do not have? If we are fearless and honest with our selves we will realize there is no need for further questions. We will see that our distress is self-caused. Far from being a negative discovery, this can be the beginning of our freedom. It can also be the ending of assigning the causes of our suffering to external agencies or internal traumas. It can be the beginning of assuming full responsibility for one’s self and for one’s actions. Clearly, the question now becomes how to gradually temper and overcome our wants, the causes of our suffering. It is at this precise point that the Teachings of all the Great Teachers become truly meaningful and begin to be seen as practices, not merely beliefs.

Raghavan Iyer teaches that an important point has been reached when one realizes, at whatever level, that the search, the practices must be undertaken on behalf of all, that there is in reality no individual salvation apart from the whole. One manner in which this has been taught is that one is seeking “so as to be the better able to help and to teach others.”

Many have taught that the application of spiritual principles begins with the cultivation of attention, of concentration. These terms imply some level of control over the mind’s ever-changing ideas and impressions. Aldous Huxley, in his utopian novel *Island*, has parrots in the trees that squawk out as one passes, “Attention, boys, attention.” Other parrots squawk out, “Here and now boys, here and now.” To be attentive to here now is to begin. It would be a serious error to interpret this to mean being attentive only

Mindfulness and Attention

to the external world. It is meant, on the contrary, to be applied to one's own process, to the activities of one's own mind. Before it can be mastered it must be objectively seen. Observing one's mind in a detached non-judgmental manner is an often-assigned beginning form of meditation. One cannot overstress the importance of not judging one's own process, especially in a negative manner. One sage refers to this as "barely noticing." This is not to say that it is not important to be attentive to one's activities in the world, to notice what one is doing and, at a deeper level, why. Persevering in such attentiveness will bring one gradually to the awareness that whatever is being attentive cannot be either the mind or the body being observed. Thus begins the freedom of identification with name and form. This also may begin awareness that that which is noticing is present in all others whether recognized or not. The question may then arise, how many observers are there? Is there one observer per body? If one is extremely fortunate, one may discover Krishna's teaching, "As one sun illumines the entire Earth, so too does one Spirit illumine every body."

To move towards a realization of Krishna's teaching requires what the Buddha called "Right Effort." This is a four-fold exercise involving one's mind, which is the veil between one's self and the divine. It involves maintaining good thoughts and encouraging further good thoughts and eliminating negative thoughts and discouraging their further arising. This is a practice begun perhaps, at a certain place in time that will progress to include all one's waking hours.

In making such attempts one will quickly come to see what constitutes one's hindrances, one's negative karmic tendencies. Again, these are not to be negatively judged, but rather accepted for what they are and in time befriended. In retrospect, one often discovers that one's greatest learning occurred through the encounter with such tendencies. It is important to be mindful of the tendency to become discouraged as one realizes the enormity of the task and to nip such tendencies in the bud. It is helpful to remember H.P. Blavatsky's teaching: "The only failure is the failure to try; try, try, ever keep trying. Is this not how mountains are climbed?" The critical factor is continuity of effort over time and, as one sage stated. "Make haste, slowly." It is, said the same sage, important to "exert a constant, gentle effort" rather than periodic fits and starts.

Mindfulness and Attention

If one is fortunate enough to encounter a True Teacher, and has to the Teacher's satisfaction sufficiently mastered the art of attention or concentration, one may be told to begin learning how to meditate. If one wonders what meditation is, the teacher may very well refer to the oldest text on meditation known namely, Pantanjali's Yoga Sutras, the first line of which reads, "Meditation is the hindering of the modifications of thinking principle." This cannot be successfully attempted prior to gaining the requisite level of attention, of concentration. Why? Because lacking concentration, attempts to focus attention upon a single point or idea will fail miserably due to the endless wanderings of the mind. Properly prepared, however, one will be able to hinder the mind's modifications for some period, however short at the beginning. What matters is that when one realizes the mind has strayed, one simply brings it back to the object of meditation. If one is attempting to meditate, for example, for fifteen minutes and has to return one's mind twenty-five times on that occasion that is simply a fact that does not stand in need of judgment. Perhaps a few days later the mind needs be returned to the object of meditation only twenty times in fifteen minutes. This is progress. Persistence will result in the ability to hold one's attention for longer periods. The preparation required to establish a basis from which one can begin to attempt true meditation can be further understood in noticing that in Buddha's teaching of The Noble Eight-fold Path, the fourth step involves eight variables of human existence, the first seven of which prepare one for the eighth, which is Right Meditation.

The counterpart of meditation is self-study, the undertaking of which will eventually lead to the ability to hold the mind to a single focus. One's initial attempts, if honest, fearless, and sincere may result in a picture so confusing that one may shrink at the enormity of the task. This is archetypically portrayed in "Arjuna's Despondency," the second chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita. Arjuna, although he is of the warrior caste, seeing the enormity of the battlefield, throws down his weapons, refusing to fight. It requires the wisdom and the cunning of Krishna to persuade Arjuna to do his duty. Here we can see that from the very beginning, the seeker requires some level of awareness of the Higher Self even if only initially on the level of belief. It is also, of course, most helpful to bear in mind the predecessors on the Path, not only what they teach but also the

Mindfulness and Attention

fact that the task is doable; that there is hope for all who undertake fearless self-study. Initially, and perhaps for some time, what one discovers in observing one's thoughts and feelings constitutes the hindrances to the ability to be mindful and attentive. Thus, at one level, one discovers aspects that need to be subdued, transmuted, and at the level of meditation one gradually discovers and awakens the spiritual will which is the key to begin to hinder the modifications of the thinking principle. Meditation and self-study are the two wings of the Great Bird. Meditation without self-study, we are taught, runs the danger of reaching what may seem to be a kind of bliss, but which is in fact, a subtle form of delusion, fragile, and obtained at the expense of the lack of self-knowledge. On the other hand, we are taught that self-study without meditation easily leads to a captivating fascination with one's self, to some degree of self-obsession. Neither becoming experts on our selves, nor becoming mindlessly blissful, pertain to the true spiritual Path.

These two practices if regularly continued will allow one to begin to see more clearly that there is nothing and no one outside of one's self that can solve the problem, so to speak, the universal human problem of seeking to be happy, to be at peace with one's self and with the world. Raghavan Iyer teaches that if these practices are not undertaken with a view to helping all of humanity, they are at some point doomed to fail. This is because seeking the Light only for one's self is itself basing one's search upon an illusion i.e., there is no inherent, separate self. Self-study leads, ironically, to the gradual realization that there is no self to study, although there is a stream of consciousness to be mastered, not only in the sense of regenerating it, but also in the sense of beginning to be able to be its observer. One is taught: "the Perceiver is one." The student may use this teaching as a basis for meditation, and to understand that this truth is one way of stating the goal.

It has also been taught that one can use one's increased awareness of one's hindrances to understand and to insert them into the hindrances and the sufferings of all mankind, to insert one's sufferings into the whole. Such insertions plant the seeds of compassion for all, and reinforce one's intentions to seek on behalf of all.

Mindfulness and Attention

At the same time, the awareness will dawn that one's states of mind and heart are not the result of anything or anyone outside of one's self; that the key to one's destiny is in one's own hands. While this may initially be somewhat frightening, further thought will reveal it to be one's greatest opportunity, the opportunity to become fully human, a being with inherent dignity. Raghavan Iyer refers to this awareness as "The Religion of Responsibility." This requires both fearlessness and courage to gradually assume full responsibility for one's thoughts, words and deeds, and for their effects. It is helpful here to invoke the distinction between theory and practice; also between the ideal and the real discussed by most Great Teachers and philosophers the primary point being is that there will always be a gap between theory and practice. What we are attempting, therefore, is not perfection, but rather to narrow the theory/practice gap. This teaching was discussed and implemented to a large degree by Mahatma Gandhi in recent times that referred to ideals, not as destinations, but as directions. Learning that perfection in practice, in daily life is not the goal gives great hope to all who contemplate its implications. It will require mindfulness to catch that aspect of one's self that wishes to use the theory/practice distinction as an excuse for behaviors inconsistent with one's stated ideals. There is need for a ruthless, but gentle, objectivity in relation to one's self. The philosopher Sartre suggested pursuing self-study as though one were studying someone else (become an observer, so to speak). This aids in the attempt to be objective and to avoid rationalizations.

William Quan Judge suggested saying to one's self as often and whenever possible, "I am not this body, these feelings, these thoughts. I am the Perceiver." Were one to apply this teaching, one will become increasingly aware that there is no inherent self, but rather an endless stream of bodily sensations, positive and negative feelings, and endless thoughts. All of these aspects will cease to be seen as one's self, but rather as one's responsibilities. Raghavan Iyer suggested saying to one's self, "These are not me, but they are mine to elevate as best I can." If one persists in these practices, it will become increasingly apparent that other people are also not their bodies, feelings, or thoughts, though they, in most cases, think themselves to be. We are taught that it is not appropriate to draw this to people's attention: rather one must develop a sense of time

Mindfulness and Attention

and of timing. We are attempting to discover our true Self, not to transform others. Krishna alludes to this in his teaching, “The duty of another is full of danger. It is better to do one’s own duty poorly than another’s duty well.”

If one begins to realize that one is not body, thoughts, or feelings, the question naturally arises who am I? This question is one of the most important subjects for contemplation and meditation. It formed the central thread of the teachings of Ramanamaharshi, held to be one of the greatest Self-Realized Sages of the twentieth century. Often times when people would ask him a philosophical or metaphysical question, his response would be, “See who is asking this question.” If one pursues the question: who am I? one will pass through various states of awareness on the path to the answer. The critical factor in this pursuit is to remain attentive to these states, to not make a self out of them, to use a teaching of the Buddha. To make a self out of any experience is to, once again, reinforce the illusion of separateness rather than the desire to aid mankind through becoming consciously one with IT. This point of view leads one to what Iyer refers to as “the mystery of the One and the many,” a mystery solved, he teaches, only by the Highest of Beings.

Each will find various hindrances along the way. The previously discussed four-fold discipline of right effort constitutes a form of transforming these hindrances into positive aids. However, at the same time one is taught to return, again and again, to one’s golden moments, to one’s more expansive awareness. Simultaneously, we are taught, we must maintain awareness that life is as a dream, as a play albeit a divine one. As Krishna teaches, “I created this entire universe from a single portion of Myself, yet remain separate.” This standpoint transcends the nihilistic use of the phrase “life is a dream,” bringing one gradually to see that there is no reality to the distinction of sacred and profane. If you think this is all illusion or a shadow play or a dream, you are right. But it is a divine illusion, shadow play, or dream. The divine is not somewhere else. It is not out there, up there, in there. It is omnipresent, like light: everywhere, at the center of every atom, everywhere in the cosmos.

Cultivating detached awareness has to do with cultivating the power of sustained attention beyond all duality, beyond reference to time. What stands in the way of this

Mindfulness and Attention

pure attention is memory and anticipation of the future that we bring with us into every situation, inner or outer. This timeless awareness brings one to the mystery of eternal present, ceaselessly reproducing itself, and endlessly elusive. One cannot be in the present and know it. It is gone before it can be known. This is perhaps why, in one respect, Lao Tzu teaches: “Those who know do not say, those who say do not know.” H.P. Blavatsky uses the example of a bar of iron falling into the ocean. The present is that part of the bar intersecting with the ocean’s surface. The bar as a whole represents, she says, “the eternal future moving through the eternal present into the eternal past.”

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