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Attention

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ATTENTION. The subject of attention has until recently been largely confined to the domain of experimental psychology. Researchers have sought to measure and explain such things as the selective capacity of attention, its range and span, the number of objects that it can appreciate simultaneously, and the muscle contractions associated with attentional efforts. Such work has been carried on amid considerable disagreement over basic definitions of the phenomenon of attention itself.

Attention as a Religious Phenomenon. In recent years, however, the subject of attention has begun to generate significant interest among students of religion. Increasing study of the various spiritual disciplines in man's religious traditions has indicated that attention plays a central role therein. Specifically, attention appears to be a *sine qua non* and common denominator of many of the forms of mental prayer and meditation found in the traditions. To further suggest that this is so and to discuss the nature and significance of contemplative attention are the central tasks of this article.

The investigation of the religious phenomenon of attention has been led by a small number of Western psychologists uncomfortable with the assumptions about human nature reigning in their field. Many have been influenced by Asian wisdom traditions and their promise of extraordinary psychological development, culminating in "liberation," "enlightenment," or "self-realization." If these traditions contained even a grain of truth, these explorers seemed to reason, then Western psychology's estimation of human potential was absurdly

low. That Asian wisdom offered well-defined procedures through which its claims might be explored and validated greatly increased the interest shown them by these empirically trained psychologists. Broadly speaking, this was the beginning of a new investigation into the psychotransformative factors of man's contemplative life, an investigation that, although initially rooted in Asian traditions, has begun to extend into Western religious traditions as well. The widely applicable yet tradition-neutral concept of attention has been central to this work.

Attention in the Traditions. Practices that strengthen the capacity for concentration or attention play a role in most great religious traditions. The importance of developing attention is most readily seen in the great traditions that arose in India, namely Hinduism and Buddhism. From the Upanisadic seers down to the present day there is in India an unbroken tradition of man's attempt to yoke his self (body and mind) to ultimate reality. Yoga takes on many forms, but its essential psychological form is the practice of one-pointed attention or concentration (*citta-ekāgratā*). Whether by fixing the attention on a mantra or on the flow of the breath or on some other object, the attempt to quiet the automatized activities of the mind through concentrated attention is the first step and continuing theme of Hindu psychospiritual yoga.

It could hardly be otherwise for the traditions that stemmed from Gautama Buddha. The *samatha* and *vipassanā* forms of meditation in the Theravāda tradition require as their root and anchor an ever increasing ability to attend, to hold one's attention fast without relinquishing it to the various psychological forces that tend to scatter it. *Samatha* is the cultivation of one-pointed attention and is the common starting point for all major types of Buddhist meditation. *Vipassanā* meditation consists in the deployment of the concentrated attention developed in *samatha* from point to point within the organism, with the intent of understanding certain Buddhist doctrines at subtle experiential levels. Though the attention sought in *vipassanā* meditation is not one-pointed in the sense of being fixed on a single object, it remains a highly concentrated and directed form of attention, the very antithesis of dispersed mental wandering. Likewise, the Tibetan practice of visualization, which is attempted only after preparatory training in *samatha*, is a way of developing the mind's ability to remain steadfastly attentive by requiring it to construct elaborate sacred images upon the screen of consciousness. The two practices central to the Zen tradition, *kōan* and *zazen*, have as their common denominator the practice of sustained, vigilant attention. Moreover, the major contemplative schools of Buddhism stress the

virtue of mindfulness, the quality of being present, aware, and, in a word, attentive.

By the fourth century BCE the ancient Taoists had already developed methods of meditation and trance induction. They were called *tso-wang* and *tso-ch'an* and were fundamentally a training in concentration by the fixation of attention on the breath. How much the origin of these practices owed to Indian influence is not known.

When we turn to the three great Western monotheisms, the phenomenon of attention is not so starkly visible. Nevertheless it is there. Broadly speaking, spiritual disciplines in the monotheisms are not so fully developed as their cousins in the East. Still, these monotheisms contain profound mystical dimensions, and it is there we must look for the practice of attention.

The actual practices and methods of Jewish mystical prayer are difficult to determine. Qabbalist scholar Aryeh Kaplan states that "some three thousand Kabbalah texts exist in print, and . . . the vast majority deal with theoretical Kabbalah" (*Meditation and Kabbalah*, New York, 1982, p. 1). There are also monumental problems of translation and interpretation. References to method can, however, be found intermittently in the ancient Talmudic texts, quite frequently in the works of Avraham Abulafia and some of his contemporaries, in the Safad qabbalists of the sixteenth century, in the works of Isaac Luria, and in the Hasidic texts. The key terms are *hitbodedut* ("meditation"), *hitboded* ("to meditate"), and *kavvanah* ("concentration, attention, intention"). The first two come from a root meaning "to be secluded." They often point beyond mere physical seclusion, however, to the seclusion beyond the discursive activity of the mind attained through concentration. *Kavvanah* likewise refers to a concentrative or attentive form of prayer capable of inducing an altered, "higher" state of consciousness. For the Jewish mystical tradition as a whole, mantralike repetitions of sacred liturgical words seem to be the central vehicles for the training of attention, but references to concentration upon mental images, letter designs, and color and light visualizations can also be found in the texts. Concentrative exercises are also linked with bodily movements and the movement of the breath. Some of the exercises prescribed by the thirteenth-century Abulafia involve long, complex series of instructions and seem to require massive attentive capability to perform without distraction. In this they seem akin to the Tibetan Buddhist practice of elaborate visualization.

In the Christian world we find the Eastern Orthodox "Prayer of the Heart," or "Jesus Prayer," a Christian *mantra* that contemplatives repeat in order to recollect themselves and to unify attention, thereby opening their

hearts to the divine presence. The bulk of contemplative texts in the Roman Catholic tradition, like those of the Judaic tradition, are concerned with theory and doctrine rather than specifics of method. In the early Middle Ages one can find references to contemplation as a seeking for God in stillness, repose, and tranquillity, but the specificity ends here. The late Middle Ages witnessed among contemplatives the growth of a prayer form called *lectio divina*, or meditative reading of the scriptures. Cistercian monk Thomas Keating describes *lectio divina* as the cultivation of a "capacity to listen at ever deepening levels of inward attention" (*America*, 8 April 1978). Ladders of progress in mystical prayer abound at this time, but one is hard pressed to find any advice on how to climb them. Practical mysticism comes more fully into bloom with the arrival of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross in the sixteenth century. In the opinion of Jacques Maritain, the latter remains the prototypical practitioner of the Roman Catholic mystical way, the mystical doctor and psychologist of the contemplative life *par excellence*. And John's way was the way of inner silence, of nondiscursive prayer, of states of mind brought about by what he called "peaceful loving attention unto God." Lately an attempt has been made to popularize this kind of contemplative attention in the "centering prayer," another *mantra*-like technique, for focusing attention and quieting the mind, similar to the Jesus Prayer of Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the world of Islam we have the contemplative practices of both silent and vocal *dhikr*, again a *mantra*-like repetition, usually of the names of God, aimed at harnessing the will and its power of attention. Javad Nurbakhsh, spiritual head of the Nimatullahi order of Sūfīs, writes that *dhikr* (Pers., *zikr*) "is the total and uncompromised attention to God" (*In the Paradise of the Sufis*, New York, 1979, p. 32). The purpose of *zikr*, the remembrance of the divine name, "is to create a 'unity of attention'." Until this is attained the disciple will be attentive to the various attachments of the self. Therefore, he should try to incline his scattered attention to the all encompassing point of Unity" (*ibid.*, p. 20). A more generic term for the kind of meditative attention achieved in *dhikr* is *murāqabah*. *Murāqabah* is described as a "concentration of one's attention upon God," as the "presence of heart with God," "the involvement of the (human) spirit (*rūḥ*) in God's breath" and the "concentrating of one's whole being upon God" (*ibid.*, p. 72). *Murāqabah*, the Sūfīs say, is not only a human activity but a divine one as well: it is because God is constantly attentive to us that we should be constantly attentive to him.

Two men who have drawn on the traditions listed above and whose eclectic writings have had a signifi-

cant impact among those interested in self-transformation are G. I. Gurdjieff and Jiddu Krishnamurti. Crucial to the Gurdjieff work is the exercise of "self-remembering," fundamentally an attempt to develop sustained, undistracted, observational attention both outwardly toward experience and, at the same time, inwardly toward the experiencer. This particular aspect of the Gurdjieff work is very similar to the "bare attention" exercises of Buddhist *vipassanā* meditation. Krishnamurti teaches that the practice fundamental to psychological transformation is "choiceless awareness." It is, again, the cultivation of sustained, observational, non-reactive attention to inner and outer experience. In isolation from the rest of Krishnamurti's teaching, this form of attention does not differ significantly from either that of the Gurdjieff work or Buddhist "bare attention."

The preceding survey is not to be understood as implying that the training of attention is the same in every tradition or that it occupies the same relative importance within the various traditions. Quite to the contrary, attention is in these traditions developed in a variety of ways, to varying degrees of depth, within strikingly different contexts, and to apparently different ends. Given the diverse group of contemplative phenomena to which the word *attention* applies, the central task of this article, a general and synthetic account of the nature and significance of contemplative attention, is fraught with difficulty. Needless to say, the following analysis can only be expected to apply "more or less" to the various specific traditions, yet it does claim to indicate the general outlines of something common to them all. Moreover, such a synthetic account is not in vain, for despite the differentiating factors surrounding the training of attention in the various traditions, there seem to be some unitive factors as well. Summarily, the traditions mentioned above conform in the understanding that the human mind in its ordinary state is somehow fragmented, unfree, and given to dispersion. Within each tradition there has evolved at least some kind of practice leading to mental stability, unity, control, and integration. Furthermore, in each tradition we discover the assumption that such psychological transformation can make reality and truth experientially more accessible.

The Nature of Contemplative Attention. Attention is, of course, a concept that occurs outside the domain of religious praxis. It is part of the vocabulary of everyday mental functioning, and even there it seems to be overworked, a single, blunt term for a wide variety of mental states. The temptation to think of it as one thing should be resisted. It is better to think of it as a spectrum that reaches from the virtual absence of attention,



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as in sheer daydreaming and mechanically determined mental flux, to acutely active alertness. Though contemplative practices themselves admit of a wide variation, the quality of attention that they require and at which they aim resides at the upper end of the spectrum. The varieties of contemplative attention, in other words, resemble each other more than any one of them resembles that uneven and intermittent phenomenon of ordinary mental functioning we usually call attention. Some further notion of the relative difference between ordinary kinds of attention and the kinds of attention at which contemplative practices aim must be developed if we are to avoid confusion later on.

Ordinary attention may be described as discursive, intermittent, and passive. It moves incessantly from object to object, its intensity "flickers," often succumbing to mental wandering, and it is reactive, or "passive," in relation to some sequence of external objects or to the autonomous stream of consciousness. Let us take, for example, the act in which the reader is currently engaged. You are following this exposition closely, attempting to understand it. Surely this is attention rather than inattention. The contemplative would agree. But he would suggest that this attention is discursive, and largely passive. In this particular case, my words are doing the discursing for your attention, leading it from place to place. Moreover, it is highly likely that, while reading, your attention will have wandered a surprising number of times, pulled down one associational path or another by autonomous psychic fluctuations. Even if you now turned away from this article and turned inward to work out a chain of reasoning, it is likely that you would do so in a state of predominantly passive attention, for such creative activity largely involves a sorting out of what the automatic activity of the psyche presents. Only in the most disciplined and highly concentrated feats of thought is passivity reduced to a minimum and the gap between ordinary and contemplative attention closed. However, the intellectual modes I have just mentioned are hardly characteristic of the run of ordinary mentation. There, the discursive, intermittent, and passive qualities of attention are fully evident. In ordinary mentation, attention is not a quality of mind that we bring to experience, but something that occurs, rather haphazardly, as our organism becomes momentarily more interested in some inner or outer sequence of phenomena. Ordinary attention comes and goes without our consent; it is not something we *do*, but something that *happens* to us. For most of us most of the time, "attention" is stimulated, conditioned, and led by mobilizations of energy along the habit-pathways within our organism so that when

it confronts its object it is always faced, as it were, by a *fait accompli*.

The attention at which contemplative exercises aim, then, may be distinguished not only from sheer inattention but from ordinary discursive attention as well. Contemplative attention is relatively nondiscursive, sustained, and uncapitulatingly alert. In the majority of contemplative exercises, an effort is made to prevent attention from being diffused centrifugally; rather, the effort is to consolidate it centripetally and to maintain its sharpness. I shall use the word *concentrative* to name attentional efforts having these characteristics. Contemplative exercises thus aim at concentrative attention, but also at something that has no counterpart in ordinary mentation and can be properly understood only in reference to the attempt to establish concentrative attention. It may be called nonreactive or receptive attention. Concentration and nonreactivity (or receptivity) are the prime distinguishing characteristics of contemplative attention, and both must be kept in mind in order to understand the psychospiritual significance of attentional training.

Some literature on the psychology of meditation has used the terms *concentrative* and *receptive* to name exclusive categories of attentional practice. This can be misleading, however, as contemplative practices seem universally to share a "concentrative" element. Rather, the true categorical distinction is between focalized and defocalized attention. For example, the classical Yoga system of Patañjali requires an extreme focalization of attention on a single point or object for the purposes of absorption of enstasis. In contrast, Sōtō Zen's *shikantaza* prescribes a defocalized attention to the entire screen of consciousness with the proviso that one attend to what arises without reaction or discursive elaboration. But "focalized" and "defocalized" do not translate into "concentrative" and "receptive" for the simple reason that defocalization does not imply a lack of those qualities I have named "concentrative." Contemplative attention may be defocalized, open to the flow of mental contents, but it does not think about them or get carried away by them. It is, in fact, a "nonthinking," that is, themeless and nondiscursive attention, even though defocalized, and the directive for attention to remain acutely alert and sustained applies fully. Without these concentrative qualities, the description of defocalized meditation would be a description of daydreaming. Furthermore, even the purest form of defocalized meditation, Sōtō Zen's *shikantaza*, is, according to some Zen teachers, too difficult for beginners. To practice it fruitfully requires that a student already have a well-developed attentive ability derived from preliminary train-



ing in one-pointed attention to the movement of breath, a *kōan*, or some other object. In other words, even the purest form of so-called receptive meditation has roots in focalized, concentrative efforts.

Although focalization and defocalization refer to actual distinctions in the deployment of attention found in contemplative exercises, this distinction is of secondary importance. Of primary importance is the discovery that contemplative practices universally require the aspirant to develop an attentional capacity that, unlike his or her ordinary attention, is relatively nondiscursive, uncapitulatingly alert, and sustained. It is in this sense that contemplative efforts from qabbalistic repetitions of the divine name to Theravāda Buddhists' bare attention have a common concentrative element.

Of equal importance is the common receptive or non-reactive element. It stems from unavoidable failure in the attempt to maintain concentrative attention. No one attains attentive equipoise for the mere wishing, and the problem arises regarding what is to be done when distractions occur. Concentrative work is constantly interrupted by autonomous mobilizations of psychic energies that dissolve the unity of attention and carry it away on a stream of associations. What then? There are only two choices: to react with frustration and judgment (in which case one has unwittingly slipped into the very egocentric perspective from which contemplative exercises are trying to extricate one) or simply to observe the distraction nonreactively, to note it, accept it, and then gently bring the mind back to its concentrated mode. Contemplative traditions clearly tend to encourage the latter choice. The theistic constant of "acceptance of God's will," the Christian doctrine of *apatheia* ("indifference"), Buddhist *upekkha* ("equanimity"), Hindu *karmayoga* (acting without seeking the fruits of action), and Taoist *wei-wu-wei* ("the inaction of action")—all of these, when brought to bear on contemplative exercises, encourage the attitude of nonreactivity. To be nonreactively attentive is, for theistic contemplatives, to bring no new sinful self-willfulness to the practice of contemplation; for nontheistic contemplatives it is to bring no new *karman* to a process meant to dissolve it.

Given the fact that the deep-seated habit patterns of the psyche will repeatedly overpower an inchoate concentrative ability and assuming that the practitioner will repeatedly attempt to establish active, concentrative attention, his constant companions in all of this are impartiality, equanimity, and nonreactive acceptance. When concentrated attention falters, one is to be a non-reactive witness to what has arisen. Whatever emerges in the mind is observed and allowed to pass without

being elaborated upon or reacted to. Images, thoughts, and feelings arise because of the automatism of deeply embedded psychological structures, but their lure is not taken. They are not allowed to steal attention and send it floundering down a stream of associations. One establishes and reestablishes concentrated attention, but when it is interrupted one learns to disidentify with the contents of consciousness, to maintain a choiceless, nonreactive awareness, and to quiet the ego with its preferences.

Should this description appear distinctly Asian and raise doubts regarding its relevance to contemplative prayer practices in the monotheisms, consider, by way of balance, this passage from *Your Word Is Fire* (1977), a work on Hasidic prayer:

Any teaching that places such great emphasis on total concentration in prayer must . . . deal with the question of distraction. What is a person to do when alien thoughts enter his mind and lead him away from prayer? . . . The Baal Shem Tov . . . spoke against the attempts of his contemporaries to . . . do battle with distracting thoughts. . . . He taught that each distraction may become a ladder by which one may ascend to a new level of devotion. . . . God [is] present in that moment of distraction! And only he who truly knows that God is present in *all* things, including those thoughts he seeks to flee, can be a leader of prayer. (pp. 15–16)

Concentration and nonreactivity are thus to be conceived as different but complementary modes of attention, which, it may be conjectured, occur in different and constantly changing ratios across the wide variety of contemplative, attentional practices. In tandem they allow the practitioner progressively to achieve disidentification from the conditioned mental flow and thus to observe that flow objectively and impartially. The dynamics and import of this process can now be discussed.

Significance of Attentional Exercises. The datum against which the significance of attentional exercises is to be understood is the relatively ceaseless and autonomous profusion of mental contents in ordinary conscious experience. Ordinary states of human consciousness may be said to be relatively noisy and dispersed, and the religious traditions that contain attentional exercises do so based on a belief that even ordinary mental turbulence is antithetical to the quiet clarity, recollection, and self-possession needed to understand and appreciate reality in subtler than usual ways. Most spiritual traditions thus contain some notion or other of the false consciousness, or false self, which when overcome, rendered transparent, or otherwise transcended, allows the self-manifesting quality of truth to disclose itself.

Let us say, therefore, that the central significance of attentional exercises is to release the human being from bondage to the machinations of the false self. And just as one might attempt to explain an eraser by referring first to what it erases, an explanation of the significance of contemplative attention is best begun with a notion of the false self that it combats.

Human beings experience a persistent need to preserve and expand their being, and thus each of us, from birth, undertakes what may be called a self-project. Everyone longs to be special, to be a center of importance and value, to possess life's fullness even unto immortality, and everyone spends energy in pursuit of those things that, according to his or her level of understanding, will fulfill these longings. According to many contemplative traditions, such longing is grounded in a profound truth: ultimately, we share in the undying life of the ultimately real. Unfortunately, however, the ego transcendence that contemplative traditions prescribe is usually rejected in favor of endless vain attempts to expand the ego in the external world through possession, projection, and gratification.

From the beginning, then, the self-project determines one's appropriation of experience in two ways. One is through desire for and attachment to any loci of thought or experience that affirm the self and enhance its will to be. The other is by defense against or aversion for those loci of thought or experience that negate the self and impress upon it its contingency and dispensability. The lineaments of personality are built up in these ways. The psyche becomes a multidimensional webwork of likes and dislikes, desires and aversions, both gross and subtle, that manifest personality in the same way that black and white dots can create the illusion of a face. Time and repetition harden parts of the webwork into iron necessity. With increasing automatism, experiences both internal and external are evaluated according to whether they affirm or negate the self-project. The self-project gradually unfolds into an egocentric system in which beliefs, feelings, perceptions, experiences, and behaviors are automatically viewed and assessed around one's sense of value and worth as an individual. By the time a human being is old enough even to begin to take an objective view of the self-project, he or she is hopelessly enmeshed in it. Predispositions have become so implicit and unconscious that the ego has little chance of recognizing the extent to which its psychological life is already determined. One automatically limits, selects, organizes, and interprets experience according to the demands of one's self-project. The chronic quality of this self-centeredness and the distance it creates between the person and reality is the basis for the common psychological wis-

dom behind, for example, the Christian's insistence of the "originality" of sin, the Buddhist's notion of the beginninglessness of ignorance, or the Muslim's belief about the recalcitrant quality of *ghaflah*, the forgetfulness of God.

The false self can thus be understood as a metaphor for psychic automatism, that is, automatic, egocentric, habit-determined patterns of thought, emotive reaction and assessment, and imaginary activity that filter and distort reality and skew behavior, according to the needs of the self-project. Having hardened into relatively permanent psychological "structures," these predispositional patterns may be conceived as constantly feeding on available psychic energy, dissolving it into the endless associational flotsam in the stream of consciousness. Energy that would otherwise be manifested as the delight of open and present-centered awareness is inexorably drawn to these structures and there disintegrates into the image-films and commentaries—the "noise"—that suffuse ordinary consciousness. As psychologist Charles Tart sees it, "there is a fluctuating but generally large drain on awareness energy at all times by the multitude of automated, interacting structures whose operation constitutes personality" (*States of Consciousness*, New York, 1975, p. 23). The psychic machinery runs by itself, ever exacerbating one's slavery to conditioning, and, moment to moment, steals attention from the real present and blows it like fluffy spores of milkweed down the lanes of the past or up the streets of the future. Our imaginative-emotive distraction is so constant that we come to accept it as normal. We see it not as the drain of energy and loss of being it actually is but as the natural state of affairs.

What allows the self-aggravating automatism of the false self to function unchecked is, in a word, *identification*. Every desire, every feeling, every thought, as Gurdjieff once put it, says "I." As long as we are unconsciously and automatically identifying with the changing contents of consciousness, we never suspect that our true nature remains hidden from us. If spiritual freedom means anything, however, it means first and foremost a freedom from such automatic identification. Contemplative traditions affirm in one metaphor or another that our true identity lies not in the changing contents of consciousness but in a deeper layer of the self, mind, or soul. To reach this deeper layer one must slowly disentangle oneself from automatic identification with the contents of consciousness. That is, in order for the self to realize the *telos* adumbrated for it in the doctrines and images of the contemplative tradition to which it belongs, it is necessary to cut beneath psychological noise, to disidentify with it so as to understand it objectively rather than be entangled in it, and, ulti-

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mately, to dismantle the very habit-formed structures that ceaselessly produce it.

Once automatism and identification are understood to be the sustainers of the false self, we are in a position to understand the psychotransformative power of concentrated, nonreactive attention. For whether a human being is a Muslim repeating the names of God or a Theravāda Buddhist practicing bare attention, he or she is, to one degree or another, cultivating the disidentification that leads to the deautomatization of the false self.

The mere act of trying to hold the mind to a single point, an act with which higher forms of meditation begin, teaches the beginner in a radically concrete and experiential way, that he or she has little or no control over the mental flow. All attentional training starts with this failure. This is the first great step in the work of objectifying the mental flow, that is, of seeing it not as something that "I" am doing but something that is simply happening. Without this realization no progress can be made, for one must first know one is in prison in order to work intelligently to escape. Thus, when the Christian is asked to concentrate his attention solely upon God, when the Muslim attempts to link his attention solely to the names of God, when the Tibetan Buddhist attempts with massive attention to construct elaborate images of Tārā on the screen of consciousness, the first lesson these practitioners learn is that they *cannot* do it. Ordinary mentation is freshly understood to be foreign to the deepest reality of one's being. The more regularly this is seen the clearer it becomes that one is *not* one's thoughts, and the more profoundly one understands the distinction between consciousness as such and the contents of consciousness. Objectification of the contents of consciousness and disidentification with them are natural outcomes.

At the same time that a contemplative learns that mental flow is not the same as identity, what one deeply is, he or she understands that neither is it the ultimate reality he or she seeks to know. The theocentric contemplative is reminded that God cannot be captured within a construct of consciousness and that, as John of the Cross says, God does not fit into an occupied heart. The Zen Buddhist understands that the *kōan* whose solution may reveal the Buddha nature cannot be solved by an intellectual construct. Not surprisingly, the metaphor of self-emptying spans contemplative traditions. The lesson everywhere reveals that mental flow can neither be identical with nor contain the reality-source one seeks. The aspirant is thus doubly disposed to disvalue the incessant discursion of the mind, to disidentify and detach himself or herself from it. Increasing objectification of mental contents enhances our ability to assess

motivation and impulses *before* they are translated into action, thus permitting increasing freedom from impulsive behavior. One can imagine the pace of life slackening and one's behavior becoming smoother and more deliberate. Attention becomes less a slave to external stimuli and more consolidated within.

As attentional training progresses and detachment from the automatized flow of mental contents is achieved, the coiled springs responsible for that very automatism begin to unwind. In other words, disidentification leads to deautomatization.

One elaboration must suffice. The incessant discursion of the mind may be conceived as the result of the useless consumption of energy by the overlearned structures or patterns of the psyche. Associational thought-sequences that seem virtually unending are a common pattern of such consumption. An increasingly quiet and disidentified attention could catch associational sequences in their beginnings and thus forestall the automatic stimulation of still other sequences and some of the behavior that flows impulsively therefrom. The integrity of the automatized processes, however, depends upon reinforcement through repetition. Forestalling associational sequences and interrupting habitual behavior would weaken that integrity. Unwholesome impulses caught by attention would be deprived of a chance to bear fruit in action or associational elaboration. Attention—or presence, or mindfulness—may thus be conceived as depriving predispositional patterns of their diet.

Contemplative attentional exercises are, in other words, strategies of starvation. Every moment that available energy is consolidated in concentrative and nonreactive attention is a moment when automatized processes cannot replenish themselves. In the dynamic world of the psyche, there is no stasis: if automatisms do not grow more strongly solidified, they begin to weaken and dissolve. When deprived of the nutriment formerly afforded to them by distracted states of mind, the automatized processes of the mind begin to disintegrate. Contemplative attention practiced over a long period of time may dissolve and uproot even the most recalcitrant pockets of psychological automatism, allowing consciousness to re-collect the ontic freedom and clarity that are its birthright.

Deautomatization, then, is a psychological, traditional term that describes an essential aspect of the process of spiritual liberation, the freeing of oneself from bondage to the false self. It names, furthermore, a gradual, long-term process of transformation, a process within which discrete mystical experiences reach fruition and without which they are destined to fade into ineffectual memories.

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By upsetting normal functioning, attentional work is bound to evoke eruptions from the unconscious. Recognition of unconscious contents and insight into their meaning, without, however, fascinated fixation upon them, is a necessary step in the process. A part of attentional work, then, is like the therapeutic process in depth psychology: its purpose is to reclaim and reintegrate parts of the unconscious for the self. But attentional work is unlike depth-psychological work in another, crucial respect. For while the contemplative recognizes the contents of the unconscious as belonging to the self, he or she simultaneously sees that self (or is exhorted by tradition to see it) objectively, remaining cognizant of the fact that attachment to it or identification with it will continue to prevent truth from disclosing itself in its fullness.

Ideally, then, long coursing in attentional exercises increases the mind's ability to conserve and rechannel energy, to spend less of it on the useless imaginative-emotive elaboration of desire and anxiety characteristic of ordinary mentation. Ideas, emotions, and images continue to arise autonomously in the mind, but the attentive mind, the emptying mind, is less easily caught up in spasmodic reactions to them, less easily yanked into the past or flung into the future by them. Emotions and impressions begin to be experienced in their "purity"; they "leave no tracks," as the Zen saying goes. Energy formerly spent in emotive reactions, ego defense, fantasy, and fear now becomes the very delight of present-centeredness and a reservoir of compassion. As the psychic habit patterns of the former person are deautomatized, new patterns are formed in alignment with his or her strengthening intention-toward-awakening. Deautomatizing attention and reconstitutive intention lead to a new reticulation of the predispositional structures of consciousness, to a new ecology of mind. By emptying the self of unconscious compulsions and reactive patterns built up over time by the self-project, the contemplative discovers a new life of receptivity, internal freedom, and clarity. Impartial observation of one's existential situation becomes increasingly acute. Intuition is awakened. Freed of the bonds of fear and desire, one begins to taste primordial, ontic freedom. Released into the present, one knows that intersection of time and eternity where reality is, where divinity dwells.

The Importance of Tradition. Having thus far focused on the nature and practice of contemplative attention, I have deliberately ignored the myriad contexts within which it may be practiced. Let me attempt to adjust the balance by a few concluding remarks on the importance of spiritual tradition.

First, it should be clear that the function of contem-

plative work is largely destructive. The accoutrements of a spiritual tradition provide a protective and constructive framework within which destructive work can proceed. The more seriously the foundations of the false self are undermined by the practice of attention, the fiercer become the storms of protest from within. The "dying" that occurs during contemplative work can cause internal shocks and reactions so profound that only the deep contours of a tradition can absorb them and turn them to creative effect. The support of a tradition hundreds of years old—rich in symbolism, metaphysical and psychological maps, and the accumulated experience of thousands of past wayfarers—and the guidance of an experienced teacher are indispensable. A "new age" movement that wishes to champion contemplative technique but jettison the traditional context in which it was originally lodged seems likely to be either very superficial or very dangerous or both.

Second, tradition stresses and a spiritual community supports, in a way that a mere technique cannot, the importance of morality as a *sine qua non* foundation and necessary ongoing accompaniment to the inner work. Without the rectification of external conduct, inner work cannot proceed far. One would be hard pressed to find a single exception to this rule in the great traditions.

Finally, human transformation is effected not solely by isolated bouts of intense attentional training; such training must be linked to ordinary life by an intentionality that makes every aspect of life a part of the spiritual work. The contemplative opus, in other words, is hardly limited to formal periods of attentional practice. Ordinary activity and formal contemplative practice must reinforce each other and between them sustain the continuity of practice that alone can awaken the mind and help it realize the *telos* adumbrated for it in the images and concepts of the tradition to which it belongs. And it is precisely the traditions' *teloi* that, by evoking the aspirant's intentionality, provide this continuity.

A spiritual *telos* evokes in the aspirant an overarching aim that fuses the activities of ordinary life and the periods of attentional practice into a continuous line, a "praying without ceasing." So fused, life becomes the "willing of one thing," a Kierkegaardian phrase for "purity of heart" or mature faith. Hubert Benoit calls this state of being "total attention," though a better rendering might be "attention to the totality." When attention is "total" one becomes increasingly aware not only of what one is doing but why one is doing it. One becomes increasingly able to grasp the universal context of one's smallest action, able to see the farthest object toward which one's action in this moment tends. When the in-

tention-toward-awakening becomes so pervasive, attention so "total," and willing so unified, the continuity of praxis leading to deep personal transformation is achieved. Attentional exercises, then, are hardly meant to be practiced in isolation. Their effectiveness requires not only long practice but also the support of a community, the guidance of tradition, the tranquillity effected by moral purification, and, finally, the continuity of practice that allows the power of will, indispensable to the transformative work, to be fully born.

[See also *Meditation and Spiritual Discipline*.]

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Books. Other important articles, by the authors mentioned above and others, are contained in a collection called *The Meeting of the Ways: Explorations in East-West Psychology*, edited by John Welwood (New York, 1979). The present study is indebted at many points to Hubert Benoit's *The Supreme Doctrine: Psychological Studies in Zen Thought* (New York, 1959), a brilliant if idiosyncratic account of the subtleties of attentional work. Benoit's concept of "total attention" is discussed in chapter 16 of his *Metaphysique et psychoanalyse* (Paris, 1949), which chapter has been recently excerpted in translation in volume 9 (Spring, 1982) of *Material for Thought* (San Francisco). Psychologist Robert Ornstein's interest in what contemplative traditions can bring to us by way of an "extended concept of man" and methods whereby transformation can be effected, has played a role in three thoughtful and useful books by him: *The Psychology of Consciousness* (San Francisco, 1972); *On the Psychology of Meditation* (New York, 1971), written with Claudio Naranjo; and a compilation of provocative articles edited by Ornstein, *The Nature of Human Consciousness* (San Francisco, 1973), which includes the above-mentioned article by Deikman. Charles Tart has written widely, but relative to this article his most suggestive work is *States of Consciousness* (New York, 1975). Also helpful is Tart's edition of articles by representatives of various contemplative traditions, *Transpersonal Psychologies* (New York, 1975), as is Daniel Goleman's *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience* (New York, 1977). P. D. Ouspensky's exposition of the ideas of G. I. Gurdjieff in *In*

Search of the Miraculous (New York, 1949) contains a number of provocative speculations on the nature and function of attention and will. Most of the articles and books mentioned here contain excellent bibliographies for those interested in pursuing matters still further. A book whose basic presuppositions are unfriendly to the issues here discussed but that is, nevertheless, extremely helpful in understanding the dynamics of the false self and the universal psychospiritual predicament of man is Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* (New York, 1973).

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