

# ATTENTION

*'The very first moment you have an opportunity to lose your attention – you will!'*  
G.I. Gurdjieff

## Levels, Degrees and Qualities

Attention has sometimes been called a “living substance,” with many different levels and gradations. “Attention can be measured like a wine, like silk. It may be very coarse, or it may be very fine and supple.” Attention has also been compared to light. Just like light, it can be absent (darkness) or very dim. It may be narrowly focused, diffused and scattered or very bright.

Attention is a discriminating power which determines which elements on the screen of consciousness become focused upon at any particular time. For instance, in situations of danger or physical survival attention is automatically directed by the instinctive/moving center. “When we speak of ‘attention’ in ordinary life circumstances, it is a distant derivative of the awesome *attention* residing within our instinctive center. A moment’s thought about the incredibly complex ability and power of the instinctive center to monitor all of our vital functions and to keep adjusting from moment to moment (to preserve the optimal physiological state) should give us a benchmark against which to measure the qualities and attributes of the attention we are able to bring to our thoughts, feelings and actions.”

Some spiritual teachings distinguish five levels or degrees of attention possible for a human being:

- No attention, inattention
- Dispersed, distracted or undirected attention
- Captive or identified attention
- Directed, concentrated or one-pointed attention
- Open, free or conscious attention

Scientific studies have shown that most people can only focus their attention on one single thing for less than two minutes. “The ordinary person has no attention – a floating attention – one moment here, next moment there. Their attention is always diverted from one point to another.”

Our degree of attention changes when our interests change. “Where my attention goes, I go. In general, my attention is not rooted in anything; it can be held by something outside me. I have to find the root of my attention in myself in order to observe myself from inside.” For most people, attention and its various qualities, levels and possibilities is an unexamined phenomenon:

What do we know of our attention? From where does it come? What is its origin? We are obviously unable to answer these questions. Yet we feel that this very extraordinary phenomenon, this force, this energy, is part of Creation. Every human being, at birth, receives a certain quantity of this vital force and, in the course of his or her existence, it will be the integrator of all things within and everything manifested . . . At no moment can we live without attention. Every day we do all sorts of things. Yes, but with what attention? With what overlay of dreams? Our manifestations reveal the contact we have with our attention. Quite often we fail to notice that we have none, that we are inattentive, that we have acted in various ways without being present to all these moments of our lives. Most of the time our attention is carried along by outer events. A trifle captures it; it is not free. (1)

Normally our attention is not free or voluntary. "It is of low quality, without power, and flows passively towards the outside. But this attention has the possibility of being transformed, of achieving a purer quality." Directed and conscious attention reveals aspects of outer or inner reality that are usually ignored (and hence invisible) by our normal, undirected surface attention. "Intentionally directed attention implies the presence of a choice for an individual; a situation where alternatives are recognized and a decision is made as to where the attention is to be placed."

When *attention* is directed (or *brought*) to the developing impression, properties that are intrinsic to the perception begin to be noticed. For example, when there is little or no attention present at the point of incoming impressions, the tree that you may be glancing at as you leave the house, is just an indistinct object. When *attention* is present, the colors of the bark and limbs may be noticed, as well as the varied limb structure, the basic leaf forms that characterize the species of tree, the shades of green that are present. Gentle movements of the leaves and small limbs induced by a light breeze may be noticed and the contrast between the green leaves and the light blue of the sky beyond may stand out. In this act of *paying attention and noticing*, the perceptual experience itself has begun to be explored. All of the properties are there, within the perception, but had been unnoticed until attention entered and a process of 'taking apart' or 'seeing into' the impression was initiated. (2)

The fact that most people have very little control over their attention becomes apparent when they attempt to observe themselves as a means of self-study and self-knowledge. "After only a moment of self-observation, your attention gets caught up in thoughts and feelings about what you have observed, and so it gets taken away from your observation." Our inability to control our attention is usually unrecognized:

Attention is the weapon for inner work, the tool for inner work. It is absolutely indispensable. And at the same time, we have quite distorted ideas of our power over attention. This is to a large extent because we know from our experience that there are many occasions in our lives when we have the impression that we

are paying attention to the same thing for a long time, and we call this concentration of attention; but if you begin to watch the process closely and you are honest with yourself, you will see that this is not concentration of attention at all. It is attention being drawn in a certain way. Maybe there is an initial effort to place the attention, but very soon it gets drawn and held. There is no control over attention. You may also see that we are sometimes taught to turn our attention towards something, but unfortunately we are never taught to take our attention away from something, and this is just as much a part of the control of attention as directing attention in a desired direction. (3)

Conscious attention is a uniquely human capacity and the quality of our attention is the key to inner growth and development. Professor of philosophy Jacob Needleman speaks of his own experience of consciously working with attention: “Looking at something in myself without trying to change it or judge it was itself a force, an energy that had an action upon what was seen. And indeed, sometimes it had a transforming action upon my entire state of being. Such was the power of pure attention. I began to understand that attention and self-observation was itself an instrument of change, but change of a kind one could never have imagined or expected. Change in the direction of human sensitivity, presence, being.”

I had already seen *something* of the importance of attention during my attempts at the practice of self-observation. I could understand through experience that our lives are what they are in large part because of the weakness of and passivity of our attention. We are *taken*, our attention is taken, swallowed by our streams of automatic thought; we constantly disappear into our emotional reactions; we are taken by our fears and desires, our pleasures and pains, by our daydreams and imaginary worries. And, being *taken*, we no longer exist as I, myself, here. We do not live our lives; we *are lived* and we may eventually die without ever having awakened to what we really are – without having lived. (4)

## Developing Attention and Awareness

In talks with his students, Gurdjieff stressed that without the development of the power of attention real inner work and transformation was impossible. In the words of his pupil Olga de Hartmann:

Mr. Gurdjieff told us very seriously that attention is absolutely indispensable for any work we wished to do with him. If we did not understand that, nothing could bring us to the aim for which we came to him. All of us there already felt that we were more than just a body. We knew that ‘something else’ was in us, and we wished to know: what *is* that? What have we to do with that? How can we call to it? How can we bring it out? How can we rely on it and not depend only on the body? All this was really a burning question for us, and Mr. Gurdjieff made it clear

that if we didn't study attention – not study in the ordinary way, but putting all our attention on developing that attention – we would arrive nowhere. (5)

Self-development requires a free and conscious attention that isn't captured or fragmented. "Our habitual attention is much too fleeting; it has no stability, no continuity. In this world where we lead our lives, we need a much more stable attention. This attention is like a little flame that tries to hold its own in the world."

Normally we have very little control over our attention, but it is possible to enhance the quality of attention and to develop it to a higher and finer level where it becomes voluntary or conscious attention:

I need to learn that attention can manifest in a completely unstable, vagrant manner. For example, in my intellectual functioning the vagrant attention lets itself be swept along by everything that attracts it: words, images, memories and every event in my day can sweep it up, each in its own way. I go out into the street; the shop windows, the people, constantly take this attention. It has no more stability than a butterfly. Go out, take a walk with the intention of thinking about your own affairs. A dog barks at you and takes all your attention . . . and what takes place in the intellect also takes place in the emotional and moving functions. Sometimes when a problem of great difficulty comes up, my attention can be concentrated, condensed; its quality changes, it acquires more force, it is sustained by an element of desire or interest. No longer vagrant, it is captured; an especially strong motive has taken over. There is, however, a very different kind of attention, an attention that is more conscious, more voluntary. Sometimes, on rare occasions, I discover the taste of it. If this occurs in my thought, I see that my thinking becomes clear. And if this occurs in my feeling, I know the feeling of being completely free from my habitual emotions. As for my body, I can also experience in a new way what is happening at its level. ( )

Conscious attention is an agent of transformation and can be developed and refined. "We do have some power of attention, at least on the surface, some capacity to point the attention in a desired direction and hold it there. Although it is fragile, this seed of attention is consciousness emerging from sleep within us." Transformation requires a total attention that arises from all parts of ourselves – body, mind and feelings.

For real inner development to occur, the quality of our attention must be honestly observed, then strengthened and refined. "Be more and more aware of your lack of attention. In the best of cases, we lose it and find it again, but we resign ourselves too easily to having so little attention. We must constantly ask ourselves where our attention is going, where is this force, toward what is it attracted."

In each of us there is this extraordinary instrument, the attention. For a very long time, I cannot say that I govern my attention. I have to see that at every moment it is taken by one thing or another. I need to exercise the possibility of keeping it more on myself, in myself, while continuing the outer work that is expected of me. Self-perfecting is linked to the perfecting of our attention. Our capacity for inner attention provides a measure of our being. (7)

By gathering and collecting one's attention it is possible to return to a calm, observing centre of awareness rather than identifying with every passing thought, emotion, sensation or action. Instead of being at the mercy of external or internal impacts and associations, there will be a mindful presence that holds the reins of attention. "The initial effort is to free my attention from identification. I need to find the effort that will allow the formation of a central core, a more stable center of gravity of my attention."

When the level of attention is strengthened, it becomes possible to gain a degree of control over the relentless pull towards inattention and forgetfulness – the return to sleep. "A central attention may be drawn in different directions, but it always returns to the center."

It is only by working to be present that my attention will develop. When it has a better quality, I struggle to keep it from weakening, I try to prevent its being taken. I try but cannot, and I try again. I begin to understand what this requires from me even if I cannot do it. In the struggle where I come back and then go again towards manifestation, I see that when my attention is completely taken, it is entirely lost to me. But if it does not go too far, it can be pulled back, as by a magnet. In that movement of my attention, I learn something of its nature. I will have to go towards manifestation, and I will always lose myself unless my attention goes both towards life and towards the inside. ( )

Directed attention is like a fine tool or instrument which can be used for either the right or wrong reason. There is a saying: *'From the same food the hornet produces poison and the bee produces honey.'* Henriette Lannes, a student of Gurdjieff, stressed the importance of this tool for inner development: "I cannot do anything except train my attention, and if I think that this is not enough, I am a fool. To perfect one's attention is to perfect oneself."

In many spiritual traditions specific methods are employed to anchor the attention. Some of these methods, such as repetition, visualization and counting exercises are more appropriate in monastic settings, while paying attention to the sensations of the body may be more effective in the circumstances of everyday life. Gurdjieff: "Attention is gained only through conscious labor and intentional suffering, through doing small things voluntarily." Throughout history, the role of attention and its development and refinement has been an integral part of the world's spiritual teachings:

The path to a change in the state of consciousness, to a state in which consciousness truly exists, is, according to all religious teachings, through sustained atten-

tion. In different teachings, the idea of sustained attention takes different forms (prayer, concentration, meditation), but the basic discipline is probably the same. An honest attempt to maintain constant attention on any one thing quickly shows how difficult it is and how far from our usual situation. In Christianity, it is described as constant prayer, but not simply an automatic repetition of phrases. In Gurdjieff's teaching, self-remembering plays a central role – the attempt to be aware of oneself at the same time as one is aware of outside impressions. The most accessible approach to this is through maintained awareness of the sensation of one's body. (9)

The state of a finer, deeper attention can be developed with steady practice and certain specific spiritual exercises:

We must accept that the state of dispersion is normal so long as we have a limited capacity to concentrate. We have to repeat and repeat coming to a collected state. Only repetition will lead to shortening the time required for preparation and increase the time available for practice. There was an exercise that was specifically created for coming to a collected state. I begin by representing with all my attention that I am surrounded by an atmosphere extending a yard, more or less. This atmosphere is displaced according to the movements of the thinking. I concentrate all my attention to prevent the atmosphere from escaping beyond its limits. Then I draw it in consciously, as though sucking it in. I feel, throughout the body, the echo of "I," and silently say "am." I experience the total sensation of being. (10)

One of the principal methods of focusing and developing attention is to consciously place awareness on specific parts of our body and the breathing process. Generally, we are unaware of our breathing and pay little attention to our physical body unless we are experiencing pain, discomfort, physical exertion or certain emotional states. However, this latter level of awareness is a *passive* result of physiological processes and not a conscious effort to direct the attention and remain *present*. The practices of following the breath and sensing the physical body open up a world of new possibilities: "The gradual increasing awareness of one's *being* that results from the continual effort to direct the attention to following (sensing) the breath and sensing the body's movements and states that accompany this effort leads to successive discoveries that concern the miraculous life processes that are perpetually taking place."

The development and control of attention is a precursor to self-remembering and the attainment of higher states of consciousness:

Gurdjieff brought a teaching of the Fourth Way that calls for conscious work rather than obedience. A fundamental idea is that in our ordinary state everything takes place in sleep. And in sleep we can see nothing. We cannot direct our lives by our own will. We are entirely dependent on influences from outside and enslaved by the automatic reactions of our functioning. It is a complete slavery. There is no higher principle, no conscious principle. Man has the possibility to awaken from

this sleep, to awaken to the higher, *to be*. The means is the attention. In sleep the attention is taken. It must be freed and turned in another direction. This is the separation of “*I*” and “*me*.” It is the active force opposed to the passive, the struggle between the *yes* and the *no*. The mobilization of the attention is the first step toward the possibility of self-remembering. Without a different attention, we are obliged to be automatic. With an attention that is voluntarily directed, we go toward consciousness. (11)

## Conscious Attention and Inner Growth

The power of attention is a liberating force. “Inner growth requires the mobilization of our attention. When the attention begins to awaken, we realize that it can become more stable, less like a cork forever bobbing back to the water’s surface.” It is possible to move from a state of distracted attention to a more stable, unified attention which integrates body, mind and feelings:

Maintenance of a conscious attention is not easy. The movement, the obligations of day-to-day existence, completely distract. With no base of operation, no home in one’s organism, the attention serves random thoughts, feelings, and appetites which conflict and tyrannize each other. Sensation of parts or the whole of the body can anchor the attention, provide it with a kind of habitat. The structure, becoming more sensitive, helps to unify attention, so it is less liable to veer into mental channels that consume its power. In turn, perceptions and sensations are quickened, insights are multiplied. Opening to the force of attention evokes a sense of wholeness and equilibrium. One can glimpse a possibility of a state of awareness immeasurably superior to that of the reactive mechanism, an awareness that transcends one’s automatic subject/object mode of response. Freely flowing, the concentrative, transforming effect of conscious attention brings the disparate tempos of the centers to a relatively balanced relationship. Thought, feeling and sensation are equilibrated under this vibrant, harmonizing influence. (12)

Conscious attention opposes the pull of the automatic conditioned functioning of the mind. “All my thoughts, emotions and actions can be held under my attention without excluding or condemning anything. For this I need a certain inner space and an attention that is free. It is only in a state of free attention that true seeing can appear.”

I need to develop a voluntary attention – that is, a conscious attention – which is stronger than my automatism. I must feel the lack of relation between my mind and my body, and see that this relation requires a voluntary attention maintained on both parts . . . Only a conscious attention, which is the opening to a higher force, has the power to prevail over the automatism. But for this the attention must always be occupied voluntarily. A conscious force cannot be automatic. The attention can be stronger or diminish, but the moment when it ceases to be voluntary,

it is taken. The moment it is no longer voluntarily turned toward this relation, the energies separate. I become fragmented and the automatism takes over. The opening to a higher force must become constant. (13)

Voluntary attention does not appear automatically but only through the focusing which provide the necessary energy to sustain the attention. "A collected state is a state of collected attention in which the attention is as whole as possible. This state does not come about by my thought resolving to be collected in order to obtain something better. It comes by seeing – through the vision of my dispersion, of the lack of attention."

This type of attention does not come because it is made captive, not by forcing – I cannot make it appear, just as I cannot force love to appear. Attention comes when it is needed, when it is called by a feeling of necessity. If I really see that I do not understand, that I have lost the direction and the meaning of my life, then at that very moment my attention is called to be here. Without it, I will never be able to be what I am. I do not have the necessary energy. But when I feel this absolute necessity, the attention appears. So I have to come to the feeling of lack, of not understanding, not knowing . . . I can daydream as I walk along a road. But when I have to walk on ice, on a slippery frozen path, I cannot dream. I need all my attention not to fall down. It is the same inside myself. If I have no real interest in myself – if I keep thinking I can answer everything, and pretend that I am able – I will continue dreaming and the attention will never appear. (14)

A free and open attention is not fixed or bound by judgement, evaluation or comparison. In the words of Jeanne de Salzmann: "Could my mind perceive without recognizing and naming, that is, without separating to be someone who looks, judges and knows? For this, I would need an attention I do not know, an attention never separated from what it observes, allowing a total experience without excluding anything."

It is only when I exclude nothing that I am free to observe and understand myself. When my brain can be active, sensitive, alive in a state of attentive immobility, there is a movement of an extraordinary quality that does not belong just to the thinking, the sensation or the emotion. It is a wholly different movement that leads to truth, to what we cannot name. The attention is total without any distraction . . . I begin to see that real knowing is possible only in the moment when my attention is full, when consciousness fills everything. Then there is no distinction; one thing is not more than another. There is pure existence. The creative act is the vision of what takes place. I learn to watch. (15)

When attention is developed and awakened we are able to respond more effectively to the requirements and experiences of life and approach higher, more refined states of consciousness and being. "If I were fully alive, everything would be fully alive around me, as it really is. What is needed for one to experience that? A different kind of attention, active, collected."



The quality of our attention is reflected in the quality of our real knowledge of ourselves. When our attention is automatic, a prisoner of our own mental, emotional and physical associations, all of the external and internal impressions we receive are fragmented. When our attention reaches a level of genuine awareness of ourselves, impressions are particularly alive and penetrating . . . This question of attention is very serious, but our experience remains limited. In us a conscious attention is missing. Only such an attention, through the quality of its movement of energy, can *hold together* the three essential parts of our being: thought, body and feeling. We generally believe that attention comes only from our thinking center, although there exists within us possible levels of attention coming simultaneously from our intellect, our body, and our feeling. At certain moments we see, though perhaps distantly, that this attention – freer but still insufficiently developed in us – is the key to a greater inner opening in which less heavy, finer energies come together. These energies confer life, light, and warmth on our inner world, in the service of a Great Reality in the universe, just as the Sun confers these things on the Earth. For those who seek to awaken to what they truly are, this new attention has more value than anything else in their lives. (1 )

Even the most mundane events of life hold the possibility of exercising a conscious attention that has significant, though unsuspected, value for inner growth and development: “Nothing is worthwhile unless it is lived in the moment. Our aim must be to be present to our lives, not to be solving imaginary problems that distance us from reality.”

One has many opportunities in one’s life to develop control of attention. If you pause to consider the things you have to do every day, I think that you will find that time and again one does things with just sufficient attention and energy to get by; in other words, one’s standard is the lowest possible standard that would not result in disaster or failure. It is very interesting to try to do well small things, according to good standards. Every day we have this opportunity. These small daily things we repeat again and again don’t seem to have much importance at all, but every one of them *can* have importance if we look at them as a means to an end. No one of them need be unimportant from this point of view, but we forget that we are surrounded by opportunities like this. (17)

Conscious attention is free and not mechanical because it can be constantly adjusted in order to maintain its purity and force. “In becoming active, the attention acquires a finer quality and becomes capable of grasping what is taking place on other levels, where vibrations have a different wavelength.”

Attention opens the door to higher levels and states of consciousness and being. “Waking sleep, presence, consciousness: these are the stages that mark man’s slow climb to the fulfillment of his possibilities.”

A man can think, feel and work with the instruments given to him for these purposes, using them automatically from force of habit, without being 'conscious' that he thinks, feels or works. He knows it; but he does not experience it. 'To be conscious' is first to experience oneself as one who knows this is so, to introduce into mechanical functioning such a quality of attention that a 'sensation of being' may arise and persist, where all the physical and psychic processes of which man is the centre unfold themselves at that moment. Then he begins to be relatively 'present to himself.' The sensation which this 'presence' evokes in him throws a new light on the events in which he is involved and constitutes a state called 'self-remembering.' In this state he can come gradually to see his functions as they really are and so begin truly to know himself. Only a great deal later, in the state of 'objective consciousness,' can a man hope to attain to a true knowledge of the world and to live on the highest level which a few may, perhaps, be able to reach. (1 )

As the quality of attention develops and matures, new possibilities of inner growth emerge. "In this new relationship of individual attention and a higher impersonal consciousness, a man or woman can become a vessel, serving another energy which can act through the individual, an energy which at the same time transforms the materiality of the body."

Humanity can begin to occupy its proper place within the chain of being only through an inner work which within the individual human being may be subsumed under the general term attention. The many levels of attention possible for man, up to and including an attention that in traditional teachings has been termed Spirit, are here ranged along a dynamic, vertical continuum that reaches from the level of biological sustenance, which humans require for their physical bodies, up to the incomparably finer sustenance that we require for the inner growth of the soul. This finer substance is obtained through the digestion of "the food of impressions," a deceptively matter-of-fact phrase that eventually defines the uniquely human cosmic obligation and potentiality of constantly and in everything working for an objective understanding of the Real. (19)

At its highest level of refinement, conscious attention provides a connection between the realm of denser influences and higher, more subtle forms of energy. Gurdjieff pupil William Segal: "Opening to the force of attention evokes a sense of wholeness and equilibrium. One can glimpse a possibility of a state of awareness immeasurably superior to that of the reactive mechanism, an awareness which transcends one's automatic subject/object mode of response. The transforming effect of conscious attention brings the disparate tempos of the centers to a relatively balanced relationship. Thought, feeling, and sensing are equilibrated under the vibrant, harmonizing influence."

Attention is the quintessential medium to reveal man's dormant energies in himself. Whenever one witnesses the state of the body, the interplay of thought and feeling, there is an intimation, however slight, of another current of energy. Through the simple act of attending, one initiates a new alignment of forces . . . Cleared of all in-

ternal noise, conscious attention is an instrument which vibrates like a crystal at its own frequency. It is free to receive the signals broadcast at each moment from a creative universe in communication with all creatures. (20)

In order to perform its function as a mediating bridge to higher, subtle, spiritual energies, attention must become impersonal and universal in nature. "Its source surrounded by mystery, attention communicates energies of a quality that the mind cannot represent. One needs to be at the service of conscious attention; one prepares for its advent through active stillness."

In quiet, tension-free moments, man's structure is open to energy flows which are ordinarily blocked. In turn, these energies blend with previously received materials, to serve the higher in a wordless, nameless exchange. Attention is not only mediating; it is transmitting. Giving and receiving, God speaks to man. Receiving and giving, man speaks to God. Just as man's structure needs to be vivified by the infusion of finer vibrations, those very same vibrations require the mixing of coarse material for their maintenance. Without the upward transmission of energies through the intermediary of conscious attention, the universe would give in to entropy. In man, the smallest deformation of a balanced attention closes down this two-way communication. Alone, the mind cannot maintain it. A relaxed body, too, is needed. Midway between micro- and macro-cosmos, man has his part to play. Returning to the body is a gesture of opening to the attention which, beckoned, is ready to serve its cosmological function. (21)

At its highest level of development, conscious attention is pure perception of things as they are, direct and immediate, complete and whole. "It is an attention which will contain everything and refuse nothing, that will not take sides or demand anything. It will be without possessiveness, without avidity, but always with a sincerity that comes from the need to remain free in order to know."

Vision, inner vision, is the liberation of an energy that is beyond thinking. It is a total awareness of life because to see is to embrace totality at the very moment. We cannot see part by part, little by little, over time . . . Vision, on the other hand, is observation without thought, without the security of words or names. In a state of pure perception, there is no more aim and no attempt to respond. One simply lives the fact. (22)

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