

## PATHS PART 6

## Attention &amp; Devotion

## Attention (continued)

T S Eliot wrote wistfully about the transient nature of timeless moments:

Men's curiosity searches past and future  
 And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend  
 The point of intersection of the timeless  
 With time, is an occupation for the saint—  
 No occupation either, but something given  
 And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.  
 For most of us, there is only the unattended  
 Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
 That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts.

[*Four Quartets*]

Such 'unattended' moments cannot be summonsed at will and it is relevant to ask why this is so. They do seem to happen more often when the path ahead is clear, though equally they sometimes come to the rescue at times of great distress. Several examples were given last week of recent experiences, including a music example in which there was a palpable sense of 'presence' at a concert. In another there was a brief loss of the ordinary self ('no-one there') after meditating and with it the loss of the usual feeling of separateness. But there was a reluctant agreement that such experiences are to be regarded as signposts and are not to be hankered after.

However, it is well within our power to do something about the groundwork on which such experiences are built: waking up, self-awareness, self-remembering, mindfulness. The exercise we have been doing is meant to explore this. Trying to remember who you are for 5 minutes shows how limited is our ordinary attention span (did anyone succeed in keeping awareness of themselves for the full five minutes?). But it also seems to help to remind us of our existence at other times. In general a regular pattern of one or more quiet times each day can establish or re-establish the good habit of coming to oneself at frequent intervals. Once the *idea* of self-remembering is established it seems that our mental machinery gives us frequent reminders.

The Shankaracharya stressed the need to acquire what he called 'one-pointed attention', that is the ability to focus one's attention on something:

Those who can attend to the outward world can also attend within. Those who can't manage to give attention to the physical work would not be able to give their attention to meditation. To give attention to physical work one must find a work which does interest him so that there is no opposition. So those who find it difficult to attend inwardly should first of all practice their attention in the work they do for their living or hobby. To attend is to be one with the work, and to be one with the work one must get body senses, Manas and Buddhi all attending simultaneously. [3.11.67]

Humans can hold their attention for long periods of time when they have to, for example in any kind of skilled operation in which one slip can cause an accident (surgery, landing a plane). We need to ask why this is possible under difficult conditions, but so hard in normal circumstances.

Self-remembering is a special case of attention where the attention turns to oneself. In Ouspensky's time there was a great deal of work on learning 'two pointed attention', in order to keep a continuity of self-remembering: that is, trying to split the attention between self-observation and what was being observed externally. In spite of intense mental efforts, it did not really get anywhere: people attained a certain facility but it did not lead on to anything else. By contrast, it seems that a realised man simply puts his attention on what he is doing and the self is part and parcel of the process. Occasionally we may get a taste of this.

There are many questions. Should we be detached from or caught up in life? What is one supposed to do if one has a spontaneous moment of self-remembering? How can one make it last? Can one make a moment of self-remembering into a timeless moment? Ultimately what is meant by self-remembering? Which self?

With the advent of meditation and other methods, access to even a little more energy has made 'waking up' more natural. So where does this leave making efforts, which many of still strive to do? At one meeting someone brought in a wind-up torch: it needed some effort to generate the electricity but all the machinery is already there. What is 'winding-up' for us?

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## Devotion

The T S Eliot quotation is a wry acknowledgement of his limitations by a sensitive man of considerable intellect. Another English poet – belonging to the affirmative way and one whom Eliot would probably have classed as a saint - had a more robust approach to the experience of higher things:

"What powerful Spirit lives within!  
What active Angel doth inhabit here!  
What heavenly light inspires my skin,  
Which doth so like a Deity appear!  
A living Temple of all ages, I  
within me see  
A Temple of Eternity!  
All Kingdoms I descry  
In me."

[Traherne, *Hymn upon St. Bartholomew's Day*]

This is the way of devotion, the *bhakti* path. In India *bhakti* can be a quite separate discipline as in the Krishna-worship movements or it can be a strand within Advaita. As in the West, the devotional movements are largely theistic, based on a belief in a god or an avatar, and seeing and worshipping god in everything. In Advaita the devotion is to the ultimate power in the universe, the Param-Atman.

The Shankaracharya was, perhaps surprisingly, said to belong to the *bhakti* way, though in his case it was accompanied by a powerful and critical intellect. Ouspensky was clearly intellectual in his approach, but he was said to have been a devoutly religious man and was shocked at the lack of religiosity in his British students. Dr Roles evidently thought of himself as an intellectual but HH described him as a man of devotion. Our ideas about devotion may be in for some shocks!

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*Exercise.* If you feel you have exhausted the 'I am here' exercise, there is no need to continue with it. But continue to find a 5 minute slot in the day, or more, to sit quietly and try to be still and just 'be'.

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