

Attention

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Taking life seriously does not mean spending our whole lives meditating as if we were living in the mountains in the Himalayas or in the old days in Tibet. In the modern world we have to work and earn our living, but we should not get entangled in a nine to five existence, where we live without any view of the deeper meaning of life. Our task is to strike a balance, to find a middle way, to learn not to overstretch ourselves with extraneous activities and preoccupations, but to simplify our lives more and more. The key to finding a happy balance in modern lives is simplicity. —from The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rinpoche

Ancient Witness: Matthew 6:25-34

I suppose that if you were going to summarize the spiritual teaching of just about all the great traditions, it might be this: PAY ATTENTION.

All of the great spiritual teachers say this—pay attention. And if we do this, many have said, if we look deeply to the heart of the present moment, we can see the presence and the reality of that which is precious, meaningful and sacred. Many call this presence “God” or “The Holy.” This Spirit, embedded with the here and now, is an inseparable part of all Reality. The way to experience God is to deeply experience the now, to experience Reality.

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is *within* you.” God’s presence is within you, within all people, within all things. “Pay attention,” he said.

Thich Nhat Hhan, in *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, wrote, “Looking deeply together is the main task of a spiritual community or a church.” The kingdom of God, which is more like an un-kingdom not marked by power, might and external results, can only be experienced directly is to look deeply, to pay attention.

It’s written that the teacher and mystic, Kabir, said, “Student, tell me, what is God?” “God is the breath inside the breath.” This is what Jesus and so many others have said. God is the beating heart of all things. “Then God formed human beings of dust from the ground, and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life...” (Gen. 2:7) The breath inside the breath. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”

And so when the teachers of all the great traditions talk about meditation, they are talking about paying attention to the beauty and the goodness that is within each moment, each breath. Here’s Kabir again:

Don’t go outside your house to see the flowers. My friend, don’t bother with that excursion. Inside your body there are flowers. One flower has a thousand pedals. That will do for a place to sit.

I've been re-reading a couple books by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is the founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He comes from a Buddhist perspective and has written extensively about mindfulness and meditation. "The journey toward health and sanity," he writes, "is nothing less than an invitation to wake up to the fullness of our lives as if they actually mattered."

A Christian might use the term, "born again" to describe a life that has been awakened, raised up, resurrected.

But paying attention and waking up is hard to do as an adult human being. We get distracted, preoccupied. Our lives become a struggle, sometimes a desperate pursuit. Our great human strength—to think and reflect—becomes our great weakness. Often the continual stream of thoughts can prevent us from paying attention to anything else. And so Jesus tells us to learn from children, plants and animals in order to wake up to the fullness of life. Buddhist say that this state is the object of spiritual practice, and they refer to it as the "beginner's mind" or "simple mind." Zen master, Charlotte Joko Beck puts it like this:

Practice is about developing or uncovering a simple mind. For example, I often hear people complain that they feel overwhelmed by their lives. To be overwhelmed is to be caught by all the objects, the thoughts, the events of life, and to be affected emotionally by them, so that we feel angry and upset. When we feel like that, we may do and say things that hurt ourselves or other people. (p. 255, Nothing Special: Living Zen)

Simple mind is the ability to simply take things in—thoughts, perceptions, senses, experiences—without judgment, without labeling them, without expectation or hopes. This is extremely difficult to do because we are taught to think, to solve problems, to overcome obstacles all our lives. These things in themselves aren't bad, but the problem comes when we cannot turn them off.

And there is the additional difficulty of paying attention in our modern American culture. Kabat-Zinn says that we are living in an "ADD nation." Individually, millions of children and adults struggle with the effects of Attention Deficit Disorder. And Kabat-Zinn says that there is a sense in which our entire society suffers from attention deficit—distracted by entertainment and technology, by careers and hyperactivity, constantly on our phones. What does it mean to pay attention when we are bombarded by so much? When our minds are constantly spinning? "Meditation," says Kabat-Zinn, "does not involve trying to change your thinking by thinking some more. It involves watching thought itself" (*Wherever You Go There You Are*, p. 94).

Contemplative practice is not about thinking, but neither is it about a thoughtless state. Some people think that meditation is about stopping one's thoughts, and for some people trying to do this is not just difficult, it's torture. But that's not what contemplation is. Rather it is about *not getting caught up in our thoughts*. This is the problem. Because when we identify with our thoughts and feelings, when we lose ourselves in them, when we get caught up in them, then we lose our awareness. We cannot pay attention. And so what one does in contemplation is to observe one's thoughts and not fight them. One lets them flow and observes them as any other sensation such as a sound or a smell. The idea is to become an objective observer of them. One simply observes and notices one's thoughts and feelings, aspirations and fears, hopes and

dreams. One image often used is to view them as you would observe clouds floating by in the sky, not wanting to latch onto them or letting them possess you. It involves turning toward whatever arises in our experience—what we consider good or bad—having faith that it is workable, having faith that it is not unbearable. No matter what happens. Not resisting. Letting them in. Letting them float by. Observing them intently without judgment. Each and every experience.

Beck tells an old Zen story:

A student said to Master Ichu, "Please write for me something of great wisdom." Master Ichu picked up his brush and wrote one word: "Attention." The student sad, "Is that all?" The master wrote, "Attention. Attention." The student became irritable. "That doesn't seem profound or subtle to me." In response, Master Ichu wrote simply, "Attention. Attention. Attention." In frustration, the student demanded, "What does this word attention mean?" Master Ichu replied, "Attention means attention."

Beck writes,

For attention, we could substitute the word awareness. Attention or awareness is the secret of life, and the heart of practice. Like the student in the story, we find such a teaching disappointing; it seems dry and uninteresting. We want something exciting in our practice! Simple attention is boring; we ask is that all there is to practice? (p.168)

Jesus and other spiritual teachers talked about the unmitigated joy and fullness we experience when we live with true attention, when we live in the here and now. They all said that when we bring our full attention to life, we then see the preciousness of all things. Christians would say that we are able to see the Divine in all things and all things in the Divine. Richard Rohr puts it like this:

The contemplative secret is to live in the now. The now is not as empty as it might seem.

But this is part of the problem. We really don't believe it. We don't trust that the now is incredibly full. We don't really believe that the most priceless experience is discovered in the here and now. We really don't trust that it can offer us an immense and boundless joy. We really don't believe that the kingdom of God is to be found there. And so we look elsewhere. Beck puts it like this:

Our problems arise when we subordinate this moment to something else, to our self-centered thoughts: not just this moment, but what I want. We bring to the moment our personal priorities, all day long. And so our troubles arise. (p. 169)

This is what the prophets were about. They were these mystics who often went into the desert, like Jesus, to pay attention to the breath within their breath, to listen to what the Spirit was saying. This not only led them to ecstatic experiences of joy, but it also led them to a state of urgency about the condition of the world.

They pleaded, they begged others to wake up and pay attention. Jeremiah wrote: “You have eyes, but do not see. You have ears, but do not hear.” The paradox was that paying attention not only brought joy and peace; it also shook them up and disturbed them. And the more one paid attention to the inner world, the more one paid attention to the outer world, and vice versa. The more they felt the joy and peace of God’s love and kindness, the more they felt God’s passion for justice. Each one leads to the other.

When we pay attention to the world—to the needs, the pain and the struggles of others—it leads to an awareness of the presence of God in our hearts. And when we pay attention to the interior world and to that Sacred Presence within, it leads to the needs, pain and struggle of others. It’s both/and.

Now, I’m like everyone else—preoccupied and distracted—and it keeps me from paying attention most of the time. But by paying attention to the needs of others, we are led to compassion, to the presence of God within us, to that Reality that connects us all.

Look, I know that there seems to be so much bad news in the world today. So much suffering and injustice. It’s tempting to just shut it all out. But I’ve concluded that this would be a mistake. To the contrary, I think we are called to pay deeper attention—to the needs of the world and to the heart of our own present moment—both directions. For when we do this, it invokes feelings of love compassion and kindness, which lead to wholeness, healing and joy.

Jesus, also a prophet, said the same thing to his own disciples, chastising them for not paying attention to the abundance always before them. They were preoccupied with practical concerns—are they going to have enough bread? And perhaps they were losing awareness that their cup was overflowing and their table was lavishly set, even in the presence of their enemies.

When we pay attention to the world—to the needs, the pain and the struggles of others—it can open us to the presence of God in our hearts, to the compassion we didn’t know we had. And when we pay attention to the interior world and to that Sacred Presence within, it leads us to the needs, pain and struggles of others. As Kabat-Zinn writes,

Love and kindness are here all the time, somewhere, in fact, everywhere. Usually our ability to touch them and be touched by them lies buried below our own fears and hurts, below our greed and our hatreds, below our desperate clinging to the illusion that we are truly separate and alone” (p. 167, Wherever You Go).

Now, paying attention doesn’t mean spending our whole lives meditating. I’m not saying that at all. But it does mean that we simplify, striking a balance in each day and each week. In our Christian tradition, we call this Sabbath. Friends, let us take the time to see that love and kindness are within us, and they surround us. May we pay attention. May we have the ears to hear and the eyes to see that our cup overflows at this very moment and that goodness and mercy continue to follow us every day of our lives.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)