

Qualities Of Sacred Attention

By Richard Harvey

This article briefly discusses five qualities of sacred attention: turning inward; openness and acceptance; spontaneity; resonance; and awareness.

Turning Inward

The process of turning inward is actually not as obvious as it sounds at first. In the modern era we are overwhelmed by an excess of outer stimuli and with the urge for doing and striving, so all our attention is usually drawn outward. Typically, even if we are given the opportunity to “rest,” we do everything we can to distract and occupy ourselves in order to keep our attention outside and avoid connecting with ourselves. However, for sacred attention to be felt and practiced, we need a certain in-turning tendency.

We have to experience and practice first how we can be in contact with our essence, how we can center ourselves in our heart-center, and keep that inward connection while turning outward. Only then, if we are serious about it, can we find an outward environment that is conducive to nourishing and cultivating sacred attention. Only when we are in touch with ourselves and our being do we have anything of value to offer another. Being in touch with our being entails clearing the inner debris, the memories, the trauma, the responses and reactions, the internalized messages from the outside world, which have formed us into the person we believe ourselves to be. Deeper than that self-image is our essence, our self, the soul, the true core of our being. In this depth we can resonate and empathize, offer compassion and wisdom, and connect with a wondrous potential of untold mystery, deep profundity, and transcendent truth.

In India, if you have ever been there, you get off the plane and immediately you are hit by the heat and the atmosphere. Very soon you can see how an ancient spiritual wisdom took root there; the whole atmosphere of the country seems conducive to sitting and meditating. In the West, forces of commercialization, industrialization, advertising and manipulative propaganda, rootlessness, and the atrophying of inner values have indoctrinated and distracted us. Different atmospheres and cultures affect us in different ways; some are more conducive to in-turning, others turn us outward. This isn't an issue in more advanced stages of inner work, but it is very influential in the beginning phases. So if you happen to be living in an outwardly oriented culture, find a place where turning inward is appreciated and supported – whether it is an actual place, a meditation center or a yoga class, or a time frame in your everyday life where you choose not to be distracted by outward events and which will support you in cultivating inward attention and getting in touch with your essence.

Sacred Practice Of Openness And Acceptance

A central quality of sacred attention is openness, openness without qualification. Simply open! Trust, faith, and inner orientation support this vivid sense of openness, which is perhaps better understood by its opposite, which is much more common. Closedness is expressed in averting the eyes, walking with the arms crossed, shrugging the shoulders, turning away, sitting with legs crossed one over the other, turning the body to one side and away from the other person, mumbling or otherwise not being distinct

in speech so as not to be heard. Furthermore in dishonesty, wishing you were not where you are now, avoidance, and lack of engagement.

Openness takes a certain courage and a strong sense of oneself, a sense of being. It is expressed in our demeanor, attitude and way of meeting. It cannot be effectively faked, so it depends on a developed sense of positive self-esteem, self-worth, and inner confidence, as well as a mature and vivid sense of interpersonal boundaries.

When we meet the person or situation in front of us with openness, we allow Truth to manifest in our lives and that of the other. Being open to the other exactly as she is in that moment, or to the events unfolding exactly as they are, we receive the opportunity to experience the divine meeting with Life.

Openness is closely related to the more complex quality of acceptance. Accepting everything is a sacred practice. It means approaching people, events, relationships, and circumstances openly, but also with an expanded possibility. In a sense anything might happen, but this does not mean that it is all good or even alright. So within the atmosphere of openness and acceptance, we may discriminate and respond appropriately, say no when we need to, and realize and remember that we have a responsibility to the other person and to ourself to represent the ethos of sacred conduct and boundaries.

Spontaneity

Openness and acceptance are also closely related to our willingness to encounter the spontaneous event often feared by us, often guarded against, usually thwarted, and hardly ever actually experienced, because of the protective aspect of our character. What for? What do you need it for? The consistently feared event is almost certainly never going to happen and even if it ever does, what a tremendous price you have paid for anticipating it, because you have paid with your life!

A useful exercise is to list your disaster scenarios. Make a list of your darkest fears. Then set the paper aside and return to it later. Now look at these scenarios objectively. Is it really worth your defensive stance and all it costs you? However bad these scenarios may be, beyond death, pain, torture, or worse, is your preoccupation with them worth the price you pay?

Sacred attention is marked by an enlightened spontaneity. Nothing is taken for granted, nothing is expected, almost anything may happen. Something of the invitation of the two participants' energy in this, the yielding to surrender, results in wonderful occurrences and fortuitous teaching events. For example, the bird that came to the window between our chairs that was just like the one in my friend's dream of the night before, the moth that flew into the table light and "told" my client opposite me that the word "moth" in her dream symbolized mother, the woman who I assured was completely safe as she worked on the violation of childhood boundaries, including her father's habit of storming into her room at night, when the door of the therapy room flew open and an electrician appeared with garish orange uniform and gigantic tool box, the man working on his anger about disturbances when a council worker with a road drill opened up on the pavement outside, so that we couldn't hear each other talk.

Trust and meet the unfolding of life events with as much openness as you can. Once you are willing to embrace spontaneity, life can bring about the most unexpected and miraculous outcomes. Let yourself be surprised.

Resonance

Resonance is a quality of warmth and receptivity, and positive regard toward the person before you and toward what they choose to share.

Resonance along with empathy allows us to respond emotionally-energetically and be confluent with another's experience. It is an expansive feeling in which your sense of self grows beyond the usual parameters.

This expansion is central to the experience of practicing sacred attention. Undefined, open, vulnerable, and strong we regard the whole world in the individual before us. Anything can happen and we are excited and engaged, yet also neutral and apart. This is rather like the condition of ataraxia, a term used to describe the state of detached serenity which may be seen in the eyes of spiritual adepts who habitually enter deep Samadhi.

In this practice of sacred attention we must make an inner commitment to ourselves to stay "on." This staying "on" is the opposite of the human tendency to fade out of the moment, to get distracted, or become unfocused. In childhood this habitual mode of engagement is simply natural. As the years pass, we become preoccupied, agitated, but it is less to do with our increasingly adult life concerns, which seem to be the cause, and more to do with our inability and unwillingness to remain consciously where we are. Remaining "on" is simple and easy: keep your eyes open, your ears open, feel, touch, taste, and smell, be aware, be present – to everything, all the time. This is not a part-time practice, nor an occasional sadhana – keep "on."

Importantly, however, I have to remark that resonating with the person in front of you does not mean you should identify with her. Be aware that your experience can never be the same as hers. Feel past the content what she is sharing with you, and enter into the tone or quality, and the feeling of present experience.

Sacred Attention and Awareness

Sacred attention begins with awareness. Everything you feel, think, and do within the practice of sacred attention is experienced within the field of awareness and devotion.

You notice how many of us are simply unconscious of our facial expression, nervous movements, changes of seating position, tone of voice, and so on. In sacred attention we attend to all this and more, all movement and energy at the gross level, the physical, anatomical, physiological level, including respiration, digestion, and circulation. We receive and attend also to etheric and subtle energies, emotional tones and flows, and learn to hear what they are saying. We listen with our whole body – physical, energetic, and emotional – and in this way we can receive communications from the unconscious self.

Now this brings with it a great responsibility. If you are hearing someone's deep unconscious thought, receiving their emotional-energetic forms, what can you do legitimately and morally with it? You may know things that this person does not even know themselves, or at least does not know that they don't want to know.

As a therapist, counselor, or healer you must practice skillful means. As a lay person there is no less of a deep responsibility. So if you are receptive to these energetic communications, remember, you often need only hold the information. You don't have to do anything with it. It may be enough that it has been

communicated, for now. Or you might discover a way to help the other person to learn and understand themselves better through asking them the right questions or gently leading them on into insights about themselves. When a healer or therapist sees something significant they may try to force the other to see it also, unwillingly. The feeling of urgency incites a certain violence in the practitioner who will be far better advised to employ skill, patience, and restraint in working with others.

This article is an excerpt from Richard Harvey's book [Your Divine Opportunity](#).