

Sacred Attention In Practice

By Richard Harvey

In classical Chinese paintings, Biblical tradition, and the Bhagavad Gita, and perhaps most of all the Upanishads, which literally translates as “sitting down at the foot of the teacher,” we have the model of how ultimate divine truth may be revealed in a relationship. Here we have examples of the timeless, sacred connection of two gathered together in the sacred name of God, a meeting consecrated to divine revelation: the ultimate milieu in which to teach, impart, and transmit spiritual truth.

In the modern day, the encounter with the sincere practitioner of sacred attention may be in the therapist’s office, the healer’s treatment room, the priest’s ashram, the temple, the yogi school, or over the kitchen table. Sacred attention is not prejudiced by philosophy or approach. However, it is an unmistakable quality of engagement that, though it may transcend method and approach, inevitably penetrates to the core or soul of those who practice it.

Strictly speaking, sacred attention is not something you can train in or learn to do in the way we usually understand it. You cannot adopt it as a style or a method and add it to existing modes of encounter. Before you can practice it, you must see the other as yourself, yourself as the other, and both of you and everything else as one unified continuous spontaneous event. You must be anchored in this great insight: I and all arising forms are One in Consciousness (or God).

This awareness comes directly from the intensity of your being, which is outside of time. So this is relevant to a question I was asked once: Was there ever a time when we were in touch with sacred attention? I answered: There was never a time we were out of touch with sacred attention and there never was a time we were in touch with sacred attention, because sacred attention is constantly here and present, but we appear to be in and out of touch at different times by creating an identification that is not who we really are. The source of sacred attention is outside of time, because sacred attention is an activity of being, not doing.

From the moment you deepen in the insight that all is Consciousness and sacred attention has enveloped you since time began and as long as time itself... you find that you are involved in sacred practice right away. Therefore you do not go to a meeting (arguably any meeting) in a hurry, without awareness, scattered in mind and body, not present. My practice when entering the therapy room is to remove my shoes and place them carefully, respectfully and mindfully to one side of the entrance where they will not be in anyone’s way. I do this as a sacred exercise in itself, because it is sacred, as are all mundane, human, routine tasks (to which you can and should – if you are spiritually inclined – bring your awareness and sense of the sacred).

Next, I stand and breathe. I take three breaths deeply and deliberately as I stand outside the door. This is my personal ritual. It is not absolutely necessary, but it is relatively necessary, to remind me... to keep the sacred to the forefront, the sense of sacred moment and opportunity. In a way I am evoking the gods and goddesses, the deities of healing and wisdom. I have a parallel practice with telephone and Skype meetings. I pause and let the phone ring three times, mindfully breathing, settling myself into a sense of deep presence.

I realize that I am speaking to you now of a rarefied, specialized kind of meeting which occurs in therapeutic sessions that some readers may not have experienced. You might say to me: but how can these sacred practices and sacred preparations be relevant to my life? But I think they can be. If you will, take the spirit of these preparations for meeting with you and practice them appropriately with others. See then how the meetings, the relationships, and in time your life can be transformed by these gentle reminders of sacredness.

There is also the vitally important point of crossing a threshold. Now any threshold should be crossed with awareness, great awareness. Waking up in the morning, passing through a door in your house, entering your car and starting it, crossing from your free time into working mode, opening the field of your attention up to an individual or a group as they or you enter a new environment. Cross these thresholds with mindfulness and notice what happens. In every case, be mindful and aware of the transition and the new circumstances you cross into – in every case!

The first thing you'll notice is you are here ...present! Your mind has not gone before you in expectations and anticipation and fearfulness. Neither are you engaged with the past in memory or regret. Notice how others enter a room. If you are present, you will learn a great deal about their characters. Harder still, notice how you enter a room and learn about yourself. Better still, transform your entering a room now... be present and still within yourself, centered, grounded, and engaged.

Being in the Presence

Attention of this kind brings us in touch with reality. We are mostly out of touch with the present reality, not really present but rather wrapped in thought, fear or expectancy. Back in 1978, I started psycho-spiritual work at the Rajneesh Ashram in Poona, India with a Gurdjieff exercise. There were 130 of us in a huge circle with our arms extended and our hands on the shoulders of the person in front of us. We were asked to follow what looked like a fairly simple count of forward and backward footsteps represented in instructions on white boards strategically placed around the room. The ensuing chaos from lack of coordination and awareness, and mental and physical absence was hilarious. Groups of four, five, ten, or twenty tumbling over on top of each other as a ripple effect destroyed this huge human circle. By the end of the fortnight this workshop took to complete – a fortnight packed with awareness exercises, spiritual insights, and enlightening practices – we performed the Gurdjieff movement again... flawlessly, absolutely present, gracefully, and mindfully we enjoyed the harmonious movements we performed together without a single misstep. The atmosphere in the room was rare, full, alive, and vibrant with life and consciousness. Only then did we come to realize how deadened, absent, distracted, unfocused, and preoccupied, how very un-present we had been when we arrived.

For sacred attention you will have to draw on the mysterious resource of truth that is already present in your life every single day. Over a sixth of your life is spent in a state very close to enlightenment, in the total lack of consciousness of yourself as an individual, separate entity. It is called dreamless sleep and it lasts longer than the REM or the dreaming part of the sleep cycle. When you dream, a dreaming self or representation of self usually appears, so you are identified. But in dreamless sleep no one is present in your consciousness. This great unknown experience occurs regularly throughout your life. Entering into its mystery may lead you to the fourth state in Hindu thought, turiya, which transcends and pervades the three relative conditions of waking, dreaming, and sleeping. Turiya is transcendent divinity and it is always present.

Sacred attention can sneak up on you and waylay you when you least expect it. Many years ago I remember appearing in the meditation hall for a much-needed Buddhist retreat. We were sitting quietly with eyes half-closed for some minutes when I heard the door gently opening. I was still prickly with the emotions and concerns of worldly life, somewhat haphazard and urgent in my mind. But the opening door changed it. There was a profound silence and deep pause, as if something momentous was about to happen. Just then the very silent padding of the monk's stockinged feet augured the sight of his gentle, mindful footsteps immediately to my left. The tenderness and care they transmitted to me brought tears to my eyes and I remained in this state of blessed attention for the rest of the retreat.

This blessed state of attention is always here. It is we who must be present. There is nothing we must do to attain it. It is freely given and available and the absurdity is this: as soon as you fall into it you are home, in touch with existence. It is as if you have always been here, in this sense of deep belonging. In dreamless sleep, in spontaneous moments of love and devotion, in deep connection with your intuition, in formless play in your spiritual body, you arrive home to this place and this orientation; this location is your real self.

Oneness

Now let me lead you to the next layer of sacred attention, which might bring confusion if you are approaching from a rational point of view, because it touches the irrational realms of the spiritual path.

In contrast to worldly attention, which separates and divides, which sees objects and events through the egoic mind of difference, and judges good or bad, attraction or aversion, sacred attention admits no difference and no separation. Years later in his temple at Arunachala, Ramana declared that the greatest good you could offer humanity was to retire to the forest and realize your true Self. A questioner asked: But what about helping other people? To which the Maharshi replied: What other people? What could sacred attention possibly be then, given this truth that there is no other, no two?

Sacred implies of God, of the Divine, devoted to the spiritual and transcendent, dedicated to Truth. Sacred means are surrender to the Absolute and pure and complete identification in the Absolute. Attention seems to imply two: a subject giving and an object receiving attention.

The clue, the answer lies in the resolution of things beyond themselves. Attention resolves in non-attention, as all things return into Oneness from which they were never truly apart.

This fundamental truth should be understood by all serious spiritual seekers: Reality is Unity, Oneness. All is Consciousness alone... there is nothing more, nothing else and nothing that stands aside, next to and other than; nothing that withstands or conflicts with Consciousness. Consciousness is another word for God. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with Consciousness, and the Word was Consciousness... So there are two fields for you to meditate on, become aware of and understand. These two fields are both Consciousness only. There is the field of arising and there is the source of the arising, both are the Absolute... that's all there is. It is as if total existence were to look at itself in the mirror of the cosmic lake. You and I are one. You are one with everything else. There are no separate things and no separation, only temporary arising forms of Consciousness. Since Consciousness is One, attention does not seriously apply. The end of attention is the beginning of freedom itself. Fundamental, real, transcendent freedom can be said to be characterized by the total and complete lack of attention. Transcending attention is the condition of Self or Oneness.

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