

AWAKENED ATTENTION AND 'I AM'

*'I am the eye with which the universe beholds
itself and knows that it is divine.'*

Shelley

Conscious Attention

One of the preliminary, yet essential, steps on the spiritual path is to realize our inability to control one of the fundamental qualities of consciousness – the ability to consciously direct our attention. Jeanne de Salzmann: "The work to be present is in the direction of consciousness. In the moment of consciousness there is an immediate impression of direct perception. This is quite different from what we usually call 'consciousness,' which operates more like a reflection faithfully accompanying what I experience and representing it in my mind." The key that unlocks a deeper level of consciousness is refined attention:

Can we become conscious? It is all a question of energies and their relation, with each energy always controlled by a finer one that is more active, more activating, like a magnet. The energy used in our functions – our thoughts, our emotions, our sensations – is passive, inert. Spent in movements toward the outside, this energy suffices in quality for our life as higher animals, but is not fine enough for an inner act of perception, of consciousness. Nevertheless, 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 or bud of attention is consciousness emerging from deep within us. For it to grow, we need to learn to concentrate, to develop this capacity indispensable for preparing the ground. This is the first thing that we do ourselves, not dependent on anyone else. (1)

Gurdjieff spoke of a higher attention or energy that could harmonize the three functions of mind, emotions and body. Professor of philosophy Jacob Needleman relates his own personal, albeit brief, experience of this higher energy when listening to his teacher Jeanne de Salzmann:

Again and again when I heard Madame de Salzmann speak about this higher attention, I felt invited to try to experience it as she spoke. And again and again the way she spoke showed me that I was not *able* to experience it. Even as she spoke of it as the one force, the one energy that could bring all my parts together, the one energy that gave meaning to human life, the energy we were created to receive and manifest as fully human beings – even as she spoke simply and clearly in this way she showed us that we were not experiencing it. Most mercifully of all, we were guided to see that lack, that absence, not to hide from it, not to pretend, not to become "mystics" . . . Once I was sitting in a room with a group of people, listening to her speak. For one fleeting second or microsecond, an

indescribable subtle force gently touched every cell in my body, every hope in my heart, every question in my mind. Or should I say simply, something truly sacred appeared in me and disappeared even as it appeared – like a thousand fine particles of silent light. My heart joyfully rested; my body surrendered all its tension; my mind stopped as wind stops for a second when it changes direction. *I am.* (2)

The ability to control and master attention leads to a deeper level of knowledge of reality and a new form of spontaneous creative energy. “The development of active attention is the key to man’s coming under higher influences both in the universe and in himself. Power, which is the ability to live in the world of real causes, begins with the growth of human attention.”

The traditions teach us that man loses everything unless he is able to *listen*, to *see*, to be present both to the lower and the higher elements in himself. In these traditional formulations, man is a bridge; and the bridge is awareness – awareness that is evoked by the struggle for active attention. Apart from that, he is naked, powerless . . . Without active attention, is it ever possible for man to see the inner aspects of reality? Is it because of passive attention that he is beguiled by appearances, both with regard to the nature of the universe and the teachings which are offered to him? Is it because of failure of attention that desire shapes his thought and understanding, and therefore his action? To be without real power: Does that not mean *to act in a false world*, a world that is a construct of the ordinary, passively attracted mind? (3)

Directed attention is a *conscious* effort related to the third state of consciousness, which Gurdjieff called *self-remembering*. It assists in the effort *to be* and create new ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving and acting. “This is a highly experimental stage, demanding of creativity, spontaneity and risk-taking, because one is not yet totally free of the past and all its encumbrances and still not able to stand fully in one’s *being*.”

Self-remembering is an immediate, present-moment state of consciousness in which the attention is divided simultaneously between the subject (self) and object (other). Fourth Way teacher William Patterson: “This demands a certain quality and strength of attention, of a direct recognition of the *Immediate*, of what-is, of having an awareness that is global in reference to oneself. Consciousness of self is a state predicated on self-remembering – a conscious awareness of the body, of being embodied, of being connected with what is happening internally, as well as what is happening externally.”

How long can our attention stay in the Immediate? This is determined by the quality and quantity of available energy and the degree of will and self-knowledge present. The energy is determined by the cumulative effect of our past efforts to move attention from waking state consciousness to self-consciousness. Will and self-knowledge are predicated on the frequency and degree with which we have experienced self-consciousness – that is, an awareness of a commensurate level of being. The self-knowledge spoken of is not descriptive, intellectual

or theoretical but lived material, impressions directly perceived and experienced. The material is vivid and objective in the sense that the impressions are not psychologized, not filtered by the personal, the subjective, but rather perceived through self-consciousness itself. (4)

By bringing conscious attention to the activities of everyday living they can be enriched and given expression in the service of the divine Self. Maharaj Shantananda Saraswati: "All our activities are done because of the inspiration by the Absolute, and are performed only for the Absolute, and everything is achieved by the forces made available by the Absolute."

Conscious actions strengthen the power of attention. If we pay no attention to where we are and what we are doing then all our actions remain involuntary and automatic. Attention releases energy by coordinating the three nervous systems and brings in a 'feeling tone,' an emotional component to what we're doing. Actions become beautiful and refined, creating something that can consciously be offered as service to the divine Self. With this kind of attention, even a task as simple as washing-up is imbued with new and vivid impressions. The balanced freedom of one's posture, the precise and fluid movements, the warm and silky feel of the water, the delightful accuracy with which we pick up and set down the plates and utensils, the perfect gleaming cleanliness of each result, all combine to make a very ordinary event into a new and genuinely artistic experience, pleasurable both to do and watch. Even done just for itself, any attentive action transforms both the experience and the result – but if performed as a service, lovingly offered with the conscious memory of the divine Self as the ever-present witness, life itself is transformed. The 'realised' person performs all their actions in this way, sitting, walking, talking, everything is bestowed with this concentrated, free-flowing attention. (5)

When attention is expanded to include both foreground and background fields of experience in a panoramic awareness, time slows and space expands. Then, the silent, ever-present background of *all that is*, reveals itself. William Patterson: "In embodied presence one experiences – sees, feels, intuitively – *what-is*. The world is experienced as it really is: dynamic, fluid, spatial, still, empty, solid, alive. And what is present is both the subject (the perceiver) and the object (what is perceived), that is, subject-object consciousness."

The fourth state of consciousness occurs where the perceiver dissolves in the perceiving. There is no subject, no center, only consciousness. Consciousness-without-an-object. This does not mean the world disappears. But as there is no subject there are no objects in the usual sense; that is, there not being a dualistic subject-object experiencing, the *relationship* with and to objects dynamically changes, as does space and time. Transcending the subject, there is no object in the sense that the foundation of experience has been constrained within the experience of subject-object (how we have unconsciously divided the world and ourselves). As the relationship with oneself is no longer that of a subject in the

midst of objects, what remains? The silence of a centerless, panoramic presence of Being. Such an integration is the result of self-knowledge and being developed and raised to a very high degree of understanding through many years of unflagging practice that evolves to an effort that is a non-effort, a negative capability, a conscious and intentional letting-be. The experience, essentially timeless and centerless, cannot be willed, and, as it is both beyond and within the time-bound world of centered subject-object experiencing, its recognition is subject to disappearance. Nevertheless, the imprint of no-thingness and nothingness remains. (6)

Establishing the Sense of 'I Am'

Throughout human history authentic spiritual teachings have pointed the way to transcend the ordinary sense of a separate self or ego and awaken to the true 'I am.' Jacob Needleman speaks of his experience with the Gurdjieff 'Work' in that regard:

Through the help of that teaching, I have understood that God cannot be known or approached beyond a certain point by the ordinary self. The awakening of the true "I am" is necessary; and it is this that has been forgotten. It is this "meta-physical amnesia" that explains why throughout history there is endless conflict and horror, not only with respect to religion but in all aspects of human life. It is this awakening to the "I am," toward which the spiritual teachings of the world have tried to lead man, sometimes from very, very far and through labyrinthine paths of ideas, art, symbolism, manners and customs, and precise ritual forms – and, above all, through the example of the lives and being of men and women who have greatly discovered what and who they are. (7)

In Gurdjieff's teaching the experience of 'I am' is called self-remembering. He taught that human beings have a sacred duty or obligation to awaken the sense of 'I am' or Self from the 'waking sleep' that blankets human life. "His vision of man on earth is of a being created to fulfill a great universal purpose of conscious love and intelligence who instead lives and dies mortally asleep to what he is meant to be."

Most people during their lives are given experiences of what can be called self-remembering, or the experience of *I am* at one or another level. Such experiences are common in childhood, but they can also occur at any time, sometimes simply out of nowhere, and more often during special extreme moments of danger; or joy; or grief; or wonder; or remorse; or deep and sudden loss or disappointment. In such moments a man or woman may come closer to becoming the human being he or she wishes to be – capable of love, compassion, inner peace, intelligence, resourceful action and often uncommon strength. That is, such experiences are like messages from our own real Self. Messages that say: "I am you. Let me enter your life." But rare are the moments when one is given

to understand how to struggle or how to live in a way that makes us, body and soul, available to such experiences. For such experiences, were we to become more available to them, would eventually transform us. In the words of St. Augustine, "God sends the wind, but man must raise the sail." (8)

The first stage of awakening is to see that what we usually believe is our own self is in fact what we are *not*. When this 'false self' is abandoned we have the possibility of reaching a state of silence, stillness and emptiness, from which a new awareness of who we really are arises. "The practice of being aware of the simple, unqualified feeling of 'I' is the way to escape the illusory prison, but this requires the exercise of a different sort of attention than we normally employ in everyday life. When awareness and attention become one the feeling of 'I' itself expands to become one with the whole universe."

The 'I am' is realized only with the perception of *what we are not*. In the nondual path of Advaita Vedanta this is known as *neti neti* ('neither this, nor that'). "From early childhood onwards, we painstakingly construct a 'narrative self,' the story of who we are, based on all the things which have happened to us and how they have affected us and made us the person we now believe ourselves to be. Everything we perceive about ourselves and all the reactions we have to people and events in the outside world, are conditioned by this personal story. Except in rare cases this precious story ignores and entirely forgets our divine origin and it is in fact the story of 'who we are not' – the self-made prison in which we live out our lives, unaware of our true nature." In the words of Maharaj Shantananda Saraswati:

If you begin to be what you are you will realize everything, but to begin to be what you are you must come out of what you are not. You are not those thoughts which are turning, turning in your mind; you are not those changing feelings; you are not the different decisions you make and the different wills and desires you have; you are not that separate ego; well then, what are you? You will find when you come out of what you are not, that the ripple on the water is whispering to you 'I am That,' the birds in the trees are singing to you 'I am That,' the moon and the stars are shining beacons to you – 'I am That': you are in everything in the world and everything in the world is in you since it only exists because it is mirrored in you; and at the same time you are that – everything. (9)

Gurdjieff stressed the importance of the pure feeling of 'I am' and the necessity of being in direct contact with *what is* without any mental or emotional activity, only a sense of physical embodiment and existence. In the words of Jeanne de Salzmann: "To live silence, to know *what is*, I need to come to the sensation of a void, empty of all my imaginary projections. I concentrate on "*here . . . now*." Solitude from what is imaginary and false is something very great. It means for the first time that I know that 'I am'."

At the heart of the world's spiritual teachings of inner transformation is the emergence of the full sense of 'I am' or 'I exist.' But in order to come to the 'real I' underlying our 'many I's' there must be a harmonious balance between our three functions of sensing, feeling and

thinking – between the outer, inner and abstract worlds. “Each of us has (potentially) a physical being aspect, an emotional being aspect and an intellectual being aspect. Only when the three aspects are blended together consciously, in balanced functioning, can we speak of True Being.” Without this balance and harmony of human functions (body, heart and mind) we are unable to fully understand and participate in the cosmic energies and processes that govern the universe:

The Universe, in its *totality*, simply *is*. Beyond our individual or collective lives, beyond the life of planets, stars or galaxies, independent of any individuated thought, feeling or sensation – the Universe *is*. Within that infinite AM-NESS lies the capacity for all things and all motions, for all interaction and relationship and for all causation and purposes . . . Man’s triune brain is so created that, when it functions *harmonically*, it can resonate with the infinite Will and AM-NESS (the ultimate I AM). Each of his brains is capable of *imaging*, in right ratio and proportion, an aspect of this triune AM-NESS. When the three brains become as *one* (in resonant perception, understanding and manifestation), a human being becomes a “man-without-quotation-marks,” a microcosmic image of the great cosmic exchange of energies. (10)

Gurdjieff taught his students a number of simple exercises to come to the sensation of ‘I am.’ “Again and again, Gurdjieff emphasized how sensing, deeper and deeper, into the physical body is fundamental to our growth. This is an emphasis on the essentiality of descending further and further toward that primary source of the ‘I Am’ – the ground of our Attention and Consciousness.”

Early in group Work we are introduced to ‘sensing the body.’ The effort to direct the attention to some portion, or all, of the physical body is an effort to establish a ‘presence’ (a momentary I AM) into the neural network of the physical body and brain. While all three-brained beings have the capacity to sense the body surface, this is an ‘automatized’ sensing that is an expression of the second state of consciousness, a sensing that depends on external stimulation. The work meaning of sensing involves an intentional, directed attention inward, bringing a *presence* to an ‘automatic’ neural functional expression of the body. For instance, when one *senses* an arm or hand, one is directing the attention on/into a process which is already, and constantly, in motion within the nervous system. One becomes aware of what has been there all of the time. When one senses a part of the body in a certain sequence (most sensing exercises involve sequence), one ‘dials in’ to an *ongoing process in the sensory world and demonstrates the degree to which the attention is directed*. (11)

The initial experience of higher states of consciousness often comes from a deeply inquiring search for our ‘true self’ beyond our normal, conditioned self. Advaita Vedanta teacher Jean Klein: “You undertake inquiring when there is discrimination, discernment. But the ego cannot discern: discerning comes from higher reason, from discernment itself, the insight that you are

not the psychosomatic body. Inquiry about life calls for a serious character – it takes a profound seriousness. Be earnest!”

The question “Who am I?” does not come from the mind. Asking “Who am I?” is accompanied by a tremendous energy, you are on fire. I think you can compare it to the condensed energy present when you are very angry or completely joyful. I would say this kind of energy must be there to ask the questions, “Who am I?”, “What am I?”, “What is life?” Then you have a glimpse of what you are. It is important that you have the glimpse for this is the understanding of the right perspective. Then you live with the right perspective. There is less and less dispersion. Your life becomes more and more oriented. You use all your energy in a completely different way. As your life becomes more oriented you see things differently. Before, you saw things only from the point of view of the I, the me. When you see things from that point of view, you live mechanically in choice, in selection. You may say, “I see it,” but you don’t really see it, because your seeing is coloured by selection, selection for security, for pleasure, to avoid and so on. But when you have a glimpse of reality, it is already in a certain way in your background. You see things less and less personally. There comes the quality of global vision, where there is no choice, no selection. You see things more and more as they are, not as you wish them to be, but as they really are. You live in this perspective, you love it, it is a jewel you wear, maybe several times a day. Then there comes a moment in your life when even this geometrical representation, the perspective, dissolves in your real nature. And then there is no return. This switchover is absolutely sudden, instantaneous. You live now without anticipation, without end-gaining. You live absolutely in the *now*. Thinking is a practical, useful tool which you use when you need it, but you no longer think when there is no need to think. (12)

Experiencing the Reality of ‘I Am’

Eastern spiritual teachings speak of the *One* universal, eternal Self existing within the innermost consciousness of every human being. “There is only pure Consciousness or the Self, absolute and all-pervading, the source and suchness of everything that arises from moment to moment, utterly prior to this world but not other than this world.”

Perhaps you, like most people, feel that you are basically the same person you were yesterday. You probably also feel that you are *fundamentally* the same person you were a year ago. Indeed, you still seem to be the *same* you as far back as you can remember. Put it another way: you never remember a time when you weren’t you. In other words, *something* in you seems to remain untouched by the passage of time. But surely your body is not the same as it was even a year ago. Surely also your sensations are different today than in the past. Surely, too, your memories are on the whole different today than a decade ago.

Your mind, your body, your feelings – *all* have changed with time. But something has not changed, and you know that something has not changed. Something feels the same. What is that? There is, in short, something within you – that deep inward sense of I-ness – that is *not* memory, thoughts, mind, body, experience, surroundings, feelings, sensations, or moods. For *all* of these have changed and can change without substantially affecting that inner I-ness. *That* is what remains untouched by the flight of time – and that is the transpersonal witness or Self. (13)

There is a profound difference between the timeless, unchanging presence of pure Consciousness or Awareness and our subjective experiences which are constantly changing: “What you are experiencing is never the same from one moment to the next. Awareness is the permanent background of the flux of experience which witnesses all the changes. It is a presence which is always present *now*.”

If you focus your attention on the mystery of the moment you will feel profoundly alive, because you will become acutely conscious of the fact *that you are*. You will recognize something about which you are completely sure. You *exist right now*. This is not an opinion. It is self-evidently true and beyond doubt. It is something you are *knowing* as your eyes pass across this page. There is one thing which is always now. *You* are always now. But what is this ‘you’ which is always now? The common sense reply is ‘I am a person.’ This is certainly what you *appear* to be, but the Gnostics suggest it is not what you really *are*. In this moment you know that you exist. And you also know something else equally obvious and just as profound. You know you are *experiencing* something. If you were not experiencing anything you would be unconscious and you wouldn’t know that you exist. So, you know you are *an experiencer of experiences*. You are awareness witnessing a flow of experiences we call ‘life.’ (14)

The light of attention reveals not only the limitations of the conditioned sense of personal self we must abandon, but also the source of the light itself. The practice of being aware of the simple, unqualified feeling of ‘I am’ is the path to escape the illusory prison we have created. Maharaj Shantananda Saraswati: “The true feeling of ‘I’ is related to the *Atman*, and from this feeling can come the aim of service to humanity. But if the feeling of ‘I’ is connected with the body, the senses or the mind, or anything with which one seems to have become associated, such as one’s name, position, profession or knowledge, then all these things when associated with ‘I’ are the false ‘I’.”

The witness, the silent, impartial observer, begins to connect with a deeper sense of ‘I,’ free and unqualified by any object; a simple, bare awareness which contains the essential feeling of ‘I’ that has always been the same and remains the same from birth to death and even beyond. I am not ‘this’ or ‘that,’ but simply ‘I am,’ witness to the miraculous creation and myself. To begin with this often has a childlike quality, not childish, but child *like* – possessing a wise innocence and a natural capacity for joy and wonder that was often present in childhood – the

same 'I' that is always open to the peak experiences that come and go. This is the first true sense of the divine Self that lives in every person, whatever their nature and qualities. If allowed to take its rightful place as the centre of our being it will concentrate and strengthen, the Conscious light it reflects brightening and expanding to take in the whole universe. (15)

The aim of spiritual work is to lead the aspirant to the discovery of the Self or 'that with which one is born,' a state of pure existence and being which includes 'all that is' in a single, undifferentiated unity. Indian master Sri Anirvân: "The ultimate reality is the great Self, but the energy of this great Self pours into everything and illuminates it in its suchness and complexity." And "You must forget everything. You know only one thing, that you *are*. You feel deeply that you *are*. Remember the phrase in the Bible: 'I am that I am.' God consciousness and self-consciousness – both become *one*. They form together one total reality."

The *Katha Upanishad* says: 'The aim is to attain pure Existence (sat).' He who has realized this has a clear understanding of what reality is. Pure Existence is the Truth beyond life and death. That you exist is a fact! And your existence is nothing but a manifestation of that which is universal and transcendental. So your existence becomes oneness in which there exists the two principles of Samkhya: Purusha, which is the spirit, and Prakriti, which is 'that which is manifested.' Spirituality cannot be acquired; it can only be derived from these two principles. Open yourself up to the sun of pure Existence as the bud of a flower opens to the light. Then the Truth will flow into you . . . Now, this pure Existence, lived with a wide-open heart amid all the circumstances of life, is in itself the state of *sahaja* – a state in which the mind is freed from all duality. The motionless mind knows 'That' which has neither beginning nor end, which is free in its very essence. (16)

The Self, timeless and formless, permeates all that exists, bridging and uniting the infinitely rich world of nature and the world of human experience. In the words of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: "The sense 'I am' is the manifestation of a deeper cause, which you may call Self, God, Reality, or by any other name. The 'I am' is in the world, but it is the key that can open the door out of the world."

Primary is the infinite expanse of consciousness, the eternal possibility, the immeasurable potential of all that was, is, and will be. When you look at anything, it is the ultimate you see, but you imagine that you see a cloud or a tree. Learn to look without imagination, to listen without distortion: that is all. Stop attributing names and shapes to the essentially nameless and formless, realize that every mode of perception is subjective, that what is seen or heard, touched or smelt, felt or thought, expected or imagined, is in the mind and not in reality, and you will experience peace and freedom from fear. Even the sense of 'I am' is composed of the pure light and the sense of being. Become aware of that pure light and you will never lose it. The beingness in being, the awareness in

consciousness, the interest in every experience – that is not describable, yet perfectly accessible, for there is nothing else. (17)

Within every human being there is a central point of profound silence and peace, an unchanging, timeless background that is eternally present in the here and now. Jeanne de Salzmann: "To know what 'I am,' my whole being needs to quiet in an act of total attention. When there is no wave, no ripple on the surface, I can see if there is something real in the depths." And "When the chaotic movements of my thoughts and feelings come to a stop a space appears – silence. I feel alive, more alive. I am conscious of being here, of existing, fully and completely. This is a sense of real 'I,' of 'I am'."

In all circumstances I have to be the witness of myself, to withdraw from the mental functioning that gives birth to reactions, and to quiet all ambition, all avidity. Then I can see myself responding to life while something in me, something immobile, does not respond. With this vigilance comes a new valuing. I am touched by a wish, a will, that is the very essence of the feeling of "I" in all its purity. It is a will to be what I am, awakening to my true nature – "I am" and "I Am." With this consciousness there is love. But this love is impersonal, like the sun radiating energy. It illuminates, it creates, it loves. It is attached to nothing and yet draws everything to it. It comes not from "doing" something, from the ego, but from love. It signifies *being* and *becoming*, with an attention that is more and more free. This is the liberation that Gurdjieff speaks of. It is the aim of all schools, all religions. With consciousness I see *what is*, and in the experience "I Am," I open to the divine, the infinite beyond space and time, the higher force that religions call God. My being is Being. To be one, whole in the face of life, is all that matters. So long as I remain conscious of this, I feel a life within me and a peace that nothing else can give. I am here, alive, and around me exists the entire universe. The life that is around me is in me. I feel this universal life, the force of the universe. And I feel myself existing as part of the world that surrounds me. Here everything helps, even the cushion on which I sit. I am present, awakened to what I am. And I see that the most important thing is *to be*. I know it – now – and as I know it, I feel related to everything around me. There is no before, no after, only life itself. I have the impression of emerging from a dream. Everything is real. I feel free, and at peace. In this state, I do not seek. I do not wish, I do not expect anything. There is only what "I am" in this moment. I know now how I am here and why I am here. (18)

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