



Attention Is Inseparable From Interrogation, by Michel de Salzmann

Our attention is much more than we generally think. It is much more than a simple mental or cerebral mechanism. It concerns our whole being. If its potentialities are far from being fully actualized in our usual life, maybe it is precisely because it is not recognized as a multidimensional keyboard and as the unifying principle of our being.Â

Paradoxically this basic act of knowing, which is attention, is only actualized when we donâ€™t know -- that is, when there is a question. Its level and, so to say, its degree of â€œtotalizationâ€• are proportional to our questioning. You have surely noticed that when a question is vital -- when it takes us in the guts, as you say -- it suspends all unnecessary movements, emotional and physical as well as mental. It clears the way for real awareness and sensitivity, which are components of my total power of attention. It is only between my not knowing and my urge to know that I find myself present, mobilized, open, new -- that is to say, attentive.

Attention in its active form is therefore inseparable from interrogation; it is essentially, in its purity, an act of questioning. This act is the privilege of our human existence. An animal contents itself with being. The responsibility of man is to question himself on the meaning of his being.

In our society, mainly concerned with production and efficiency, the drama is that our capacity for questioning, still so vivid in early childhood, is very quickly eradicated or pushed aside for the benefit of our capacity for answering. When a child has a real question, most of the time he is immediately given a stupid answer. In the best cases the educator goes to the dictionary to be sure his answer is accurate, but anyhow unconsciously, if not proudly; he closes the question. From school to the end of our life it is always necessary to answer. We are compelled to learn how to answer, If we don't know how to answer, we are just no good. So little by little we become some kind of model machine able to all answer to all situations with the necessary blindness as regards its own contradictions. [...]

Is it possible to keep alive in ourselves our most authentic and precious capacity, which is questioning? This is the whole problem confronting us, actually. But are we strong enough, free enough, concerned enough to really question ourselves while answering? [...] Can we at the same time neither affirm nor deny, neither resist nor follow, assume that we neither know nor don't know, that we are able or unable? Can we be acutely present to what is, without judgment or

indifference, without any solution or escape? It would mean being aware on all fronts, renouncing the known for the unknown, withstanding the inevitable principle of repetition, staying still within our movement.Â

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