INTRODUCTION

Few things affect our lives more than our faculty of attention. If we can't focus our attention—due to either agitation or dullness—we can't do anything well. We can't study, listen, converse with others, work, play, or even sleep well when our attention is impaired. And for many of us, our attention is impaired much of the time.

People whose attention falls well below normal may be diagnosed with an attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and the most common treatment for this problem is with pharmaceuticals. The popularity of Ritalin and similar drugs has increased dramatically in recent years, and the United States manufactures and consumes five times more of such drugs than the rest of the world combined. The many detrimental side effects of ADHD drugs are deemed a small price to pay for suppressing the symptoms of attention disorders. This materialistic approach to treating ADHD is enormously profitable for the drug manufacturers, but it is profoundly disempowering for the individuals who become reliant on them. While our culture may proclaim "Just say no to drugs," when it comes to treating attention disorders, the message is "Go for the quick fix."

This is not to say that pharmaceuticals cannot be helpful in treating ADHD. They certainly can, as millions have discovered through their own experience. They may be essential at times, especially to combat severe symptoms. But they don't *cure* anything. They merely suppress symptoms while generating harmful side effects, and even if you don't become addicted, you may develop a psychic dependence on them—perhaps for life. Thus, in clinical cases, drugs can play an important role within the

context of a wider set of interventions. But the sooner we can get children, adolescents, and adults off their drug dependence and provide them with methods for maintaining attentional balance on their own, the better it will be.

Our faculty of attention affects us in countless ways. Our very perception of reality is tied closely to where we focus our attention. Only what we pay attention to seems real to us, whereas whatever we ignore—no matter how important it may be—seems to fade into insignificance. The American philosopher and pioneer of modern psychology William James summed up this point more than a century ago: "For the moment, what we attend to is reality."[1] Obviously, he wasn't suggesting that things become nonexistent when we ignore them; many things of which we are unaware exert powerful influences on our lives and the world as a whole. But by ignoring them, we are not including them in *our* reality. We do not really register them as existing at all.

Each of us chooses, by our ways of attending to things, the universe we inhabit and the people we encounter. But for most of us, this "choice" is unconscious, so it's not really a choice at all. When we think about who we are, we can't possibly remember all the things we've experienced, all the behaviors and qualities we have exhibited. What comes to mind when we ask "Who am I?" consists of those things we have been paying attention to over the years. The same goes for our impressions of other people. The reality that appears to us is not so much what's out there as it is those aspects of the world we have focused on.

Attention is always highly selective. If you consider yourself a materialist, chances are you attend primarily to physical objects and events. Anything nonphysical seems "immaterial" to you, in the sense that it doesn't really exist, except perhaps as a byproduct of matter and energy. But if you think of yourself as spiritual or religious, in all likelihood you have been attending to less tangible things. God, the soul, salvation, consciousness, love, free will, and purely spiritual causation may seem far more real to you than elementary particles and energy fields. I suggest that if you were able to focus your attention at will, you could actually choose the universe you appear to inhabit.

Attention also has a profound impact on character and ethical behavior. James felt that the capacity to voluntarily bring back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. Christian contemplatives have known for centuries that a wandering mind easily falls into temptation, leading to sin. And Buddhists have recognized that a mind prone to distraction easily succumbs to a myriad of mental afflictions, leading to all kinds of harmful behaviors. If we can direct our attention away from negative temptations, we stand a good chance of overcoming them.

James also asserted that geniuses of all kinds excel in their capacity for sustained voluntary attention. Just think of the greatest musicians, mathematicians, scientists, and philosophers throughout history—all of them, it seems, have had an extraordinary capacity to focus their attention with a high degree of clarity for long periods of time. A mind settled in such a state of alert equipoise is a fertile ground for the emergence of all kinds of original associations and insights. Might "genius" be a potential we all share—each of us with our own unique capacity for creativity, requiring only the power of sustained attention to unlock it? A focused mind can help bring the creative spark to the surface of consciousness. The mind constantly caught up in one distraction after another, on the other hand, may be forever removed from its creative potential. Clearly, if we were to enhance our faculty of attention, our lives would improve dramatically.

THE PLASTICITY OF ATTENTION

While countless studies have been conducted over the past century on various aspects of attention, remarkably little is known about the plasticity of attention, that is, the extent to which it can be enhanced with training. Given the enormous significance of attention in all aspects of life, this oversight is strange.

One of the reasons for the lack of research in this field may be due to a common assumption that the level of our attention is inflexible. William James wrote:

> The possession of such a steady faculty of attention is unquestionably a great boon. Those who have it can work more rapidly, and with less nervous wear and tear. I am inclined to think that no one who is without it naturally can by any amount of drill or discipline attain it in a very high degree. Its amount is probably a fixed characteristic of the individual.[2]

James recognized the enormous significance of the ability to voluntarily sustain one's attention on a chosen topic, declaring that an education that could effectively improve this faculty would be *the* education *par excellence*.[3] But he was at a loss when it came to providing practical directions for achieving this goal.

As long as our minds oscillate compulsively between agitation and dullness, wavering from one attentional imbalance to another, we may never discover the depths of human consciousness. Can the mind be irreversibly freed from its emotional afflictions, such as craving, hostility, depression, envy, and pride? Are there limits to our love and compassion? Is awareness finite and immutable? We know that the mind has powers of healing, which are sometimes attributed to the "placebo effect," and that it has the capacity to make us ill as well. What other powers lie dormant within human consciousness, and how can they be tapped? These questions have been posed by contemplatives throughout history, and focused attention has been a crucial tool in exploring them.

In the modern world we enjoy unprecedented access to many rich traditions of meditative inquiry. The Hindu and Buddhist traditions stemming from classical India have made uniquely refined advances in the field of attentional development. The methods of attentional training described in this book are drawn from this contemplative heritage and involve various kinds of meditation practice. And while the techniques explained here come from the Buddhist traditions of India and Tibet, they will be accessible and beneficial to anyone who engages in them, regardless of religious or ideological leanings. As with any skill, such as playing the piano or learning a sport, we can, through drills, repetition, and habituation over time, develop capacities presently beyond our reach.

No matter where you are starting from, you can benefit from training your attention. My goal in this book is to provide tools for enhancing attention to people no matter where they are on the spectrum of attentional development. At the basic level, these methods may be helpful for preventing and treating ADHD, which turns even mundane tasks into great hardships. For those with a higher initial capacity, the methods here can be used to maintain better attention in everyday life, and bring greater professional performance, physical health, and emotional well-being. Finally, this book contains methods for rigorously refining the faculty of attention to levels unimagined and unexplored in the modern world and will be of special value for contemplatives seeking to unlock the mysteries of the mind.

Especially in the advanced stages, this book sometimes delves into issues that presume either a background in or a proclivity for examining the doctrinal issues that underpin attentional training within a Buddhist context. Since I have written this book in part to address confusion among contemporary Buddhists about how the Buddha and later commentators taught shamatha and the practical implications of that confusion, non-Buddhist readers may find the discussions tangential to their concerns. You need not be a Buddhist to practice shamatha, and you should feel free to skip over these discussions. Nonetheless, you may profit by examining the divergences that have arisen over the 2,500-year history of this discipline.

TEN STAGES OF ATTENTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As a framework for the gradual development of attention, I have chosen the most complete and detailed description I have found in any contemplative literature—the ten stages described by the eighth-century Indian Buddhist contemplative Kamalashila in his classic work *Stages of Meditation*.

In a historic debate in Tibet, Kamalashila argued that the thorough purification of the mind requires training in three things: ethics, attention, and contemplative insight. Flashes of insight are valuable, but after the fleeting bliss of such meditative experiences, the dirty laundry of the mind still awaits cleaning. For that, contemplative insight must be supported by a high degree of attentional balance, and this requires systematic training.

This path is detailed with landmarks. By using Kamalashila's outline, we can know where we are, what we should be doing, and what to look for. The ten stages of attentional development are:

1. Directed attention
2. Continuous attention
3. Resurgent attention
4. Close attention
5. Tamed attention
6. Pacified attention
7. Fully pacified attention
8. Single-pointed attention
9. Attentional balance
10. Shamatha

These ten stages are sequential. The stages start with a mind that cannot focus for more than a few seconds and culminates in a state of sublime stability and vividness that can be sustained for hours. One progresses through each stage by rooting out progressively more subtle forms of the two obstacles: mental agitation and dullness. The successful accomplishment of each stage is determined by specific criteria and is accompanied by a clear sign.

THREE TECHNIQUES

To guide meditators along these ten stages, I have chosen from Buddhist teachings three techniques that I have found effective for people in the modern world. These three techniques are the basis for the three divisions of this book. For the first four stages, you should practice whatever method you find easiest. By stage five, the mind is relatively stable, and you can move on to subtler techniques.

For achieving the first four stages, I recommend the practice of *mindfulness of breathing,* variations of which can be found in Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan Buddhism. Mindfulness of breathing means settling your

awareness on the sensations involved in breathing, continually returning your attention there whenever your mind wanders.

Beginning with the fifth stage, I recommend a method called *settling the mind in its natural state.* In this technique, you direct your attention to mental experiences, all the events—thoughts, mental images, and emotions—that arise in the domain of the mind. This method is drawn from the *Dzogchen,* or "Great Perfection" lineage, but is found in other Buddhist traditions as well.

With the instructions for the eighth attentional stage onward, we move on to the still subtler practice of maintaining awareness of awareness itself. The technique is called *shamatha without an object.* Here the practice is not so much one of *developing* attentional stability and vividness as it is of *discovering* the stillness and luminosity inherent in awareness itself.

The training in mindfulness of breathing may be helpful to anyone, including those seeking to prevent or treat attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders. Many people find the second practice, that of settling the mind in its natural state, to be more challenging, but some meditators take to it naturally. Likewise, the practice of awareness of awareness is subtler still, but it may be optimal from the beginning for those who are strongly drawn to it.

You may use any one of the three methods to progress along all ten stages of attentional development, or you may follow the sequence described in this book. How fast you progress will depend on the level of your commitment and the degree to which your lifestyle and environment support such practice.

INTERLUDES

Interspersed with my explanations of the ten stages, I have inserted "interludes," ancillary practices that complement the training in attention. After the explanation for each of the first four stages, I have inserted an interlude on cultivating one of four qualities of the heart: *loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy,* and *equanimity.* These practices are especially helpful for balancing our emotions and for opening our hearts. If we know how to work intelligently with our emotions, we can avoid many obstacles that might otherwise hinder our pursuit of focused attention.

Interspersed with the explanations of stages five through nine are interludes on the daytime and nighttime practices of lucid dreaming (drawn from modern scientific research) and of dream yoga (stemming from Tibetan Buddhism). These practices are designed to enhance mindfulness throughout the day and the night, for if our focused attention were limited to the time we spent in formal meditation, the benefit would be minimal.

One of the greatest benefits of a powerful faculty of attention is that it gives us the ability to successfully cultivate other positive qualities. With the powerful tool of focused attention, we can uproot formerly intractable bad habits, such as addictive behaviors or harmful thoughts and emotions. We can use it to develop an openhearted stance toward others and, on that basis, experience profound insights into the nature of the mind and of reality, radically altering our relation to the rest of the world.

GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Most people would find their lives greatly enhanced just by attaining stage two of the ten stages. This level of development takes some effort, but it can be achieved by people who are living a busy life with career and family commitments as long as they are willing to set aside some time for meditation. It can dramatically improve the quality of everything you do and make you more resilient in the face of emotional and physical stressors. If that is your goal, there is no problem with using the techniques in this book for that purpose.

However, as noted above, this book is also a guide for people who wish to go well beyond what are considered normal levels of attention. For most people, achieving stage three will require a greater commitment than an hour or two spent each day in meditation in the midst of an active life. The more advanced stages of attentional development are accessible to people who dedicate themselves to weeks or months of rigorous practice in a conducive environment. Progress beyond the fourth attentional stage requires a vocational commitment to this training, which may involve full-time practice for months or years at a stretch.

If you traverse the ten stages of attentional development discussed in this book, the benefits are truly immense. Upon reaching the ninth stage, your mind is finely honed, freed from even the subtlest imbalances. At this point, it is said that you can focus effortlessly and unwaveringly upon your chosen object for at least four hours. At the beginning of this training, meditators are traditionally encouraged to practice for sessions of twenty-four minutes, which is one-sixtieth of a full day and night. At the culmination of this training, you should be able to sustain attention with unprecedented clarity for ten times that long.

According to Tibetan oral tradition, among meditators who are well qualified to embark on this discipline, those of sharpest faculties may be able to achieve all ten stages within three months; those with "medium" faculties may take six months; and those with "dull" faculties may require nine months. Such estimates assume that the meditators are living in a contemplative environment and devoting themselves day and night to this discipline. The reference to sharp, medium, and dull faculties pertains to the level of talent and attentional balance individuals bring to this training. Just as some people are naturally gifted musicians, athletes, and mathematicians, so are some gifted with exceptional degrees of attentional stability and vividness, which gives them a head start in this practice. Others may have an extraordinary level of enthusiasm and dedication to this training, and that will serve them well through the long months of hard work that it entails.

This level of professional training may seem daunting and unfeasible to most readers of this book, but compare it to the training of Olympic athletes. Only a small number of individuals have the time, ability, and inclination to devote themselves to such training, which can appear at first glance to have little relevance for the diverse practical problems facing humanity today. But research on serious athletes has yielded many valuable insights concerning diet, exercise, and human motivation that are relevant to the general public. While the training of Olympic athletes is focused primarily on achieving physical excellence, this attentional training is concerned with achieving optimal levels of attentional performance.

Once the ninth level has been achieved, the meditator is ripe for an extraordinary breakthrough, entailing a radical shift in one's nervous system

and a fundamental shift of consciousness. One is now poised to achieve shamatha: one's mind is now marvelously serviceable, capable of being used in a myriad of ways, and one's body also is endowed with an unprecedented degree of suppleness and buoyancy. It is a remarkable achievement, unlike anything one has ever experienced before.

Since the time of the Buddha, when people have asked Buddhist adepts about the nature of their practice, they have commonly answered, "Come and see!" In 1992, neuroscientists studying the effects of advanced meditative practice among Tibetan retreatants explained how they wanted to examine the neural and behavioral effects of meditation. One of the monks responded, "If you really want to understand the effects of meditation, I'll be glad to teach you. Only through your own firsthand experience will you truly know the effects of such practice."

Let's now begin working on the first stage, using the technique of mindfulness of breathing.

THE BEGINNING STAGES:
MINDING THE BREATH