

# Practice Note: Selective Nature of Attention

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 16, 2013

One of the interesting issues around attention, mindfulness, and what we notice in our lives is the selective nature of attention. There are so many different things we could pay attention to in any given moment, that actually our life would probably come to a standstill if we tried to pay attention to it all. Or try to figure out what to pay attention to. There is a degree of habit or learned behavior that helps us find our way efficiently. For example, most of you have by now figured out that you are listening to my voice and what I am saying. Your considerable capacity for attention is directed here. But there are a lot of things you are leaving out. Most of you at this moment are probably not thinking about your little toe. Probably most of you are not thinking about or focusing on the grayness of the chairs here at IMC. There is a lot you can notice if you are interested.

One of the things that affects what we listen to, what we pay attention to, what we look at, and what we pick out of the environment, has to do with what we think is important. It has to do with our values, our concerns, and the variety of ways that life has conditioned us to focus on some things more than others, because they are important or useful. Sometimes we have had trouble in our life, and so that conditions what we pay attention to in the future. We may be hyper-vigilant around certain areas because of past experiences. Some of this is learned from our family, or upbringing, or culture.

Also, our interests and desires come into play. If you come here to IMC and your desire is to have a comfortable chair for your home, you might be testing the chair to see if this is the right one. But if you don't need a chair in your home, that is not a concern for you. Or, if you are interested in a mate, then part of you may be scanning the room. Could that person be a good mate? Does that person have a wedding ring on? You may have reached a certain age when the mating instinct is not as strong, and so rather than noticing who might be a good mate, you might be noticing some other quality of people. Generally, most of the time, our attention is selective.

One of the great pieces of wisdom to carry with you is to know that attention is selective. To know that attention is limited by what we think is important, or by our conditioning. And if you know that, it gives you the opportunity to do something that you likely wouldn't do if you didn't know that. That is to be curious about what is outside of your particular bubble of awareness, outside of what you are interested in, your conditioning. In being interested and curious about that, then maybe you can figure out that you can stretch your attention, maybe open the attention wider. What am I leaving out? What am I missing here that might be useful? I don't think the grayness of these chairs is an important thing to pay attention to today. But there might be other things to notice while you are here.

Some people, for example, have a selective process that is about me, myself, and mine – what's in it for me. Other people's selective attention is one of, "Who are these people here, and how do I harmonize with them? How do I support these people in what they are doing?" Two different ways of directing one's attention. One might be personal only; one might be interpersonal only. Or both. Each of us has a selective process. Knowing that, we can ask the question, "What am I leaving out? What am I leaving out that might be important? By only noticing myself, is there some value in opening up more widely? If I am only noticing the people around me, would it be useful to become aware of myself?"

If you notice that most of your attention goes into your thoughts, then noticing that, say, "What about the rest of me? My body, my emotions and feelings? What is happening there?" Stretching beyond where your attention usually goes is one possibility for this mindfulness practice.

One thing helps in this process is what is called the "not-knowing mind." If you already know, then

you are being selective; but if you don't know, then you might look around at what is going on. Having curiosity and openness helps quite a bit.

One interesting aspect of asking, "What am I missing here?" is that it generally helps put you in the present moment. Generally what is outside of your focused attention is what is happening now, as opposed to what is happening outside of my attention back there in Menlo Park. That is not so interesting; it's just more thinking. This question helps you be more in the present moment: "What is outside of my attention? What am I leaving out in this range that I am paying attention to?"

I believe this works best for mindfulness practice if it helps the mind become still, quiet, or calm. A way of opening up is not to do it with a lot of contemplation, thinking, or analysis. Rather open the mind in a way that is kind of quiet and still. Diffuse, open awareness. See what comes. How I experience this is if I am going to listen to a very faint sound, far in the distance, I might close my eyes and let my mind become really still to see if I can hear the sound. Is there a way to be still and quiet, and then take in what else is going on here with a fuller awareness?

If this makes sense, you might experiment this morning to see if this approach is useful to the practice. Thank you.