

Inner call Podcast #144 Foreground and Background – October 4, 2021

Suppose that we have a task to perform, an everyday household chore – perhaps we are in the kitchen, chopping a potful of vegetables. It is very likely that while keeping some attention on the knife to avoid chopping our fingers as well as the onions, we will be thinking about something else, some subject perhaps quite unrelated to cooking.

Or imagine that we have a journey to make, by bus or train. Apart from the attention necessary to get on board and to watch for our stop, our mind will most probably be elsewhere. We might be thinking about what awaits us when we arrive, or about what we have just left behind, or very commonly nowadays it might be that we are listening to music or a podcast, and the headphones will add to our separation from the immediate experience of our travel.

Our attention, in other words, is easily divided between what is in the foreground and what is in the background, and it is rare that we focus on a single thought or action.

This division of our attention might seem like a clever strategy to deal with the complexities of life, for our lives have many threads, each with its own demands, but for the seeker on the spiritual path, it in fact makes the journey more difficult. The Truth must be present now, or it could not be truth, but if we are not present in the moment, then how can we know the truth?

The average person has a mind a little like a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, perhaps his 'Garden of Earthly Delights,' which is crowded with separate images that reveal more detail the more we study them. We carry numerous thoughts and feelings, working simultaneously and quite often in contradiction to each other. Some thought-forms echo versions of the past, and some sketch hoped-for versions of the future that will never be more than fantasies unless we take charge of the present and shape it according to our wishes. Some thoughts are simply habitual patterns we have adopted from elsewhere, that have no relevance to our own experience. Needless to say, this has an effect on our perception, and on our ability to determine what we wish to do.

What is worse, division of our awareness also works against our spiritual efforts. As good students, we might strive to faithfully do our spiritual practices each day, but the exercises can only be as effective as the life we ourselves give them. If the words of our prayers, for example, are in the foreground, but in the background our thoughts are wandering elsewhere, considering repainting the meditation space, perhaps, or checking the time before we have to leave for work, or wondering if we are saying the prayers in a sufficiently pious way, then the prayers will be starved of life. Or consider something as apparently simple as thinking about our divine ideal. What could be easier, we might say, since the divine ideal is by definition our highest ideal, that which we long for most strongly – but what happens? We might place love in the foreground, for we have been told that God is love, but if all around that ideal there is the noisy racket of concerns about our self – 'my mistakes, my defects, my shortcomings, my feelings of being unloved, my lack of spiritual progress' – then the foreground will simply fade into the noise of the background. After such a contemplation, we might conclude that 'god' isn't so special after all, and maybe 'spirituality' is just a fiction.

Hazrat Inayat Khan taught that there is a progression from concentration to contemplation to meditation, and as each step builds upon the previous, we cannot

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skip over any of them. Concentration, therefore, the ability to hold a thought as long as we choose to, is the essential foundation stone for all that we hope to build. We can begin by being present in all that we do – discovering how to live life one moment at a time.