

The Value of Attention

Experience is dependent on attention. What we attend to, and particularly *how* we attend makes up our life. It is of great significance to us, yet isn't always held in high regard. So much depends on it, the whole development of the dharma relies on attention.

Attention is a gift: it is given to us, yet it is precious. We feel this when we receive another's attention, and also when we consider the blessing of having attention at all. Generally, though, we take attention for granted and tend to give it away for 'free'. For centuries attention has been traded. Today highly profitable social media and internet businesses have built enormously influential companies by buying our attention cheaply then selling it to advertisers for profit. We might do well to ask: how is this possible?

Human's are complicated processes, yet we follow simple patterns. We fall for psychological tricks while trading attention for information and connection to internet search and sharing platforms. Many of us get so addicted to this deal we can't give up.

Examples of how our psychology brings us back, or helps us stay longer online:

- pleasing dopamine hits of being 'liked' soon fade, and need to be repeated often;
- vague notifications feed our curiosity, or hope of a pleasant engagement;
- infinite-scrolling feeds & articles dissolves even the most conscientiously set boundary;
- fear of missing experiences & events keeps us engaged, even when nothing happens;
- imbalanced comparing of our inner life with another's outer expression builds craving;
- we like to be agreed with or validated: algorithms that echo our ideas bring ease.

Because all of this works on deep habits and tendencies we all share, the attention absorbing (data-mining) companies can reliably guarantee the attention of masses. Then they sell a digital version of us (data about our gender, age, location, and behaviour, etc.) to advertising & insurance companies and any other prying establishments. Regularly we see our data being manipulated for political and corporate ends. There are also privacy and security risks to all of this; like your medical situation being used against you. But let's focus on the (Dharma) implications of a view that allows for a cheap value for attention.

The more we devalue attention and give it away the less we have for our inner nourishment and wellbeing, and for the positive engagement needed to build a better world. The minimum we should do is bring attention to how it actually feels to engage this way. If it's not pleasant, do we want to discover new how's and where's for our attention?

Buddha dharma points to a well-being that comes from within. It is not immediately obvious to us what a huge impact where and how we bring attention to phenomena affects what we experience. Yet mettā practice, for example, quickly reveal how life changes with kind warm attentiveness. Some of the deepest places of joy and peace we can experience come from sustained gentle attention shaped by creative perception. Attention is a key tool for inner freedom that also supports our outer well-being too. Let's use it wisely and kindly to harmonise the world towards real meaningful connectivity.