ON THE NEGLECT OF
EVENLY SUSPENDED ATTENTION

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Do not think, scheme or cognize,
Do not pay attention or investigate; leave mind in its own sphere.

Do not see any fault anywhere,
Do not take anything to heart,
Do not hanker after the signs of progress such as heat-
Although this may be said to be what is meant by
non-attention,
Yet do not fall a prey to laziness;
Be attentive by constantly using inspection.

-sGam.po.pa

To repeat: the capacity to forget, the ability to eschew desire and understanding, must be regarded as essential discipline for the psycho-analyst.

-W.R, Bion

The rule for the doctor may be expressed: "He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his 'unconscious memory'." Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: "He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind."

-So Freud

The recent renewal of interest in psychoanalytic listening (Freedman, 1983; Schwaber, 1983) and psychotherapeutic attention (Speeth, 1982) follows a time in which Eastern methods of manipulating attention have been introduced to Western psychology and culture (Walsh, 1980). Familiarity with Eastern, specifically Buddhist, theories of attentional development may allow for a more precise understanding of

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Freud's original recommendations on the subject. At the same time, such familiarity may illuminate subtle but substantial deviations in the manner in which these recommendations have been interpreted by generations of analysts since Freud's time. Such deviations have detracted from the power of the original proposals and have discouraged the deliberate cultivation of attention by the analyst.

In a parallel to the basic rule of free association, achieved when the "uncritical self-observer" takes "the trouble to suppress his critical faculty" (Freud, 1900, pp. 134-36), Freud repeatedly admonishes the analyst to "suspend . . . judgment and give . . . impartial attention to everything there is to observe" (Freud, 1909, p. 23). Thus, Freud posits an optimal attentional stance or state of mind characterized by two fundamental properties: the absence of reason or deliberate attempts to select, concentrate or understand; and even, equal and impartial attention to all that occurs within the field of awareness. This technique, says Freud,

is a very simple one. As we shall see, it rejects the use of any special expedient (even that of taking notes). It consists simply in not directing one's notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same "evenly suspended attention" (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears. . . . It will be seen that the rule of giving equal notice to everything is the necessary counterpart to the demand made on the patient that he should communicate everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection. If the doctor behaves otherwise, he is throwing away most of the advantage which results from the patient's obeying the "fundamental rule of psychoanalysis." The rule for the doctor may be expressed: "He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his 'unconscious memory.'" Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: "He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind" (Freud, 1912, pp. 111-12).

Through the application of this impartial attention, not only to the patient's productions but also to the analyst's own inner experience, Freud proposed that unconscious meanings would eventually emerge in the analyst's consciousness.

Experience soon showed that the attitude which the analytic physician could most advantageously adopt was to surrender himself to his own unconscious mental activity, in a state of evenly suspended attention, to avoid so far as possible reflection and the construction of conscious expectations, not to try to fix anything that he heard particularly in his memory, and by these means to catch the drift of the patient's unconscious with his own unconscious (Freud, 1923, p. 239).
The establishment of this impartial, non-judgmental, evenly applied attention allowed for an attunement that Freud described as follows:

To put it in a formula: he must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ toward the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver converts back into sound waves the electric oscillations in the telephone line which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor's unconscious is able, from the derivatives of the unconscious which are communicated to him, to reconstruct that unconscious, which has determined the patient's free associations (Freud, 1912, p. 115).

What Freud proposes, then, is the constant application of a particular attentional stance that can clearly be distinguished from mere passive attention or from merely allowing the mind to freely wander. The ability to give 'equal notice' to every object of awareness for hours at a time implies the establishment of a distinct state of consciousness which Schachtel (1969) has termed an "attentional attitude."

Contrasting the attitude of open attention similar to what Freud describes with the more familiar focal attentional attitude of the obsessive character searching for a particular meaning, Schachtel elucidates Freud's stance.

This open attention does not concentrate on anyone aspect but scans all aspects of the object; it does not scan with a narrow and intense, but with a wide focus and with a relaxed rather than tense and warding-off concentration. Such scanning is in the service of a global perception, of global knowing, rather than in the service of wanting to know this or that about the object. ... The motive underlying such open attention does not have any particular, partial purpose; it is the wish to relate to the object, to know it as it is, out of interest in the object (Schachtel, 1969, pp. 73-74).

The efficacy of such "listening away" for the specific recall of "latent sexual content" has been demonstrated in one experimental study designed to test Freud's recommendations (Spence & Grief, 1970). Yet the establishment and maintenance of this "attentional attitude," despite the advantages described by Freud, proves to be difficult.

For most people ... this is not an easy task. Many listen with their theoretical and diagnostic preoccupations or with their "plan of treatment" in mind and overlook what may differ from these. Or they listen with their countertransferential notions about what the patient ought to be like to suit their ideas of the most desirable
adaptation to society or their ideal of what man should be like. They may feel exasperation if the patient is not at all like that, or impatience if he does not seem to want to be like that or not be in a hurry to change. Or they watch, like a detective, to jump at the patient's "faults," that is, at where he deviates from the analyst's preconceptions, and so forth. All this, of course, is apt to get into the way of open attention. of evenly-suspended attention that wants to see the other person as he really is (Schachtel, 1969, pp. 75-76).

Several authors (Schachtel, 1969; Green, 1973) have recognized the similarity between Freud's description of optimal analytic attention and various "Oriental" evocations of awareness. Fromm (1960, p. 83) compared Freud's attempts to "break through the conscious thought system" through the method of free association with the similar attempts of Eastern religious practices—but he failed to mention the analogous efforts proposed by Freud to enhance analytic attention. Speeth (1982) points out the startling similarity of Freud's attentional stance to the basic Buddhist meditation practice of bare attention, mindfulness or choiceless awareness that "is rare in other religions but runs through Buddhism like a red thread connecting the original Buddhism of the Theravada or Southern school with the continuous awareness practice of 'shikan taza' in Soto Zen and even the non-practice that is called 'mahamudra' at the pinnacle of Tibetan Buddhism" (Speeth, 1982).

This practice of equal attention to changing objects of awareness—one of two attentional strategies used in meditation techniques (the other being the single-minded focusing of attention on a single object) (Goleman, 1977)—can be developed through meditation practice to the point where it proceeds effortlessly and becomes the predominant influence on an individual's experience. Training in this skill is the stated purpose of most Buddhist meditation practices (Nyanaponika, 1973; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1972).

Bare attention is defined by two technical paradigms: a particular form of deploying attention and a particular management of affect. Cognitively, attention is restricted to registering the mere occurrence of any thought, feeling, or sensation exactly as it occurs and enters awareness from moment to moment, without further elaboration. One attends to the process of thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they come and go in consciousness, not to their content. Affectively, stimuli are attended to without selection or censorship and without reaction—e—without preference, comment, judgement, reflection, or interpretation. If physical or mental reactions occur, they themselves are made the objects of bare attention (Engler, 1982, p. 32).
According to the stage model of Buddhist psychological theory (Goleman & Epstein, 1983; Narada, 1975; Nyanamoli, 1976), this ability is significantly established at the level of "access concentration" when the factors of mindfulness, "which notices what is happening in the moment" (Goldstein, 1976, p. 23), and concentration, "the ability of the mind to stay steady on an object," are developed to the point that rapidly changing objects of awareness can be attended to evenly over a prolonged period of time.

The development of this ability is the cornerstone of Buddhist psychology and is well detailed in its psychological texts. Although apparently unknown to Freud and his circle (a paper by Alexander [1931] on Buddhist meditation practices mentions only the concentration practices), the parallels are clear. The Buddhist assertion that, with practice, a state of mind may be established within which changing objects may be viewed evenly over time lends credence to Freud's argument that a similar state of mind may be established, with practice, in the analyst. Freud apparently discovered the usefulness of this attentional state for himself and endeavored to describe it and hand it down, utilizing it to more fully understand his patients.

Evenly suspended attention has received curiously little attention from the analytic community over the years. It is "not defined in A Glossary of Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts, nor is it singled out in either Fenichel's or Glover's major writings on technique" (Lichtenberg & Slap, 1975, p. 297). It has been recognized that the state is difficult to maintain, (McLaughlin, 1975) but the concept, as described by Freud, has been "one of the least discussed, certainly one of the least well conceptualized aspects of psychoanalysis" (Gray, 1973).

When the concept has been invoked, it has generally been to encourage analysts either to pay attention to their own subtle preconceptions and biases or to deepen their own introspection. As stress is laid on these ideals, however, the fact that they are derivatives of a specific attentional stance is easily neglected. Thus, analysts find themselves in the position of striving after these ideals without adequate awareness of the method for accomplishing them.

This is an ideal, and I believe only approximations are made to it by the best analysts. That should hearten us, for it means a future for subtler technique and future scientific discoveries. These clarifications I see along these lines. We shall be freed from any necessity in our inner psyche to lay any emphasis of choice upon what we see in the material. We shall see it more and more as a whole and complex pattern, and direct our attention to the obscurities. We shall be
freed from any inner necessity to search for, and be gratified by finding, positive manifestations. If we are of the type whose security depends upon assurance that it is the other person who is hostile and not one's self, or if, on the other hand, we are of the type who feels secure only when the other person is positive towards us, we are going to be subtly influenced by this need in our analysis. That is, our bias will be to be looking for negative or for positive affects (Sharpe, 1950, p. 18).

What has been generally recognized is that the deepening of introspection that comes “without the conscious use of reasoning” (Beres & Arlow, 1974) is an invaluable source of information for the analyst. Becoming aware of one's own thoughts, feelings, images and fantasies as they are evoked by listening to the patient (Kern, 1978; Ross & Kapp, 1962) can often be especially helpful.

During periods of unopposed even-hovering attention, however, i.e., when the analyst's basic observational attitude is not disturbed, the deeper layers of the analyst's psyche are open to the stimuli which emanate from the patient's communications while the intellectual activities of the higher layers of cognition are temporarily largely-but selectively-suspended. Unless the analyst's unresolved conflicts concerning his own unconscious libidinal and aggressive responses interfere with his receptiveness to the patient's (object-instinctual) transference messages, the analyst will be able to remain an attentive listener for prolonged periods and will escape neither through an attitude of disinterested emotional withdrawal nor through the premature formulation of (preconscious closures (Kohut, 1971, p. 274).

While the notion that analysts should do their best to weed out biases, to remain attentive to their countertransference reactions, and to facilitate their introspection in order to encourage empathy has gained general acceptance, the means of achieving such standards has not been systematically elaborated. “How each of us achieves this state of listening is quite individually determined” (McLaughlin, 1975). Ferenczi (1928) noted the demanding nature of this kind of attention and stated, “A strain of this kind scarcely occurs otherwise in life, and I do not doubt that sooner or later it will call for the creation of a special hygiene for the analyst” (Ferenczi, 1928, p. 98).

Despite Ferenczi's optimism, no specific training in the cultivation or maintenance of this attentional attitude ever developed. In fact, the trend in analytic thinking has been to move away from Freud's original recommendations in an expansion and revision of his concept that has diluted its meaning and deprived the profession of one of its most important tools.
At the core of this dilution of Freud's original meaning lies the influential work of Theodore Reik, who, in 1948, provided the first major commentary on the topic of evenly suspended attention. In a subtle but far-reaching criticism of Freud's teaching, Reik "rejected the term 'evenly suspended attention' because attention is never evenly suspended; what is going on is an actively roaming mind. He suggested the term 'freely floating attention' ... " (Freedman, 1983). The assertion by Reik that attention is never evenly suspended but is instead actively roaming, while it may have been an honest appraisal on Reik's part, negated an essential characteristic of the specific state of consciousness that Freud so carefully described. Freud's description assumes the development of the capacity to give "equal notice" to all phenomena—a capacity that in Buddhist psychology is reached at the stage of "access concentration" through the development of the factors of concentration and mindfulness, Reik rejects this as unobtainable and instead begins to emphasize what has come to be identified with "freely floating attention" in the analytic literature: the oscillation of the analyst's attention between receptive listening and intrapsychic reorganization of the material for the purposes of interpretation. "What is required is a continuous shifting between a readiness to receive stimuli, an aimless gaze on the one hand, and a more focused and voluntary form of attention on the other" (Freedman, 1983).

However useful this revision has been in explaining how analysts conceptualize their attentional processes, it has relegated Freud's clearly written proposals to the readily forgotten past, and reestablished the place of focused, voluntary attention in analytic listening.

Reik's ideas of freely floating attention have clearly had a greater influence upon analytic thinking than Freud's. His descriptions are closer to the everyday experiences of most people and do not posit the existence of a unique state of consciousness in which noticing proceeds effortlessly and equanimously. Reik's primary metaphor for the analyst's attention is that of a revolving searchlight in search of an enemy, illuminating all of the territory within its range. This metaphor implies the capacity to immediately recognize the enemy and suggests that the analyst pause and select certain material as especially noteworthy. This attitude flies in the face of Freud's original statements, repeated below:

For as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him; one point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this...
selection he will be following his expectations or inclination. This, however, is precisely what must not be done. In making the selection, if he follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows; and if he follows his inclinations he will certainly falsify what he may perceive. It must not be forgotten that the things one hears are for the most part things whose meaning is only recognized later (Freud, 1912, p. 112).

Despite Freud's admonitions, and Reik's own expressed understanding of the need not to search after particular information, Reik described optimal analytic attention as follows:

The quality of attention in psychoanalysis may be well illustrated by the comparison with a searchlight. Voluntary attention, which is restricted to a narrow sector of our field of experience, may be compared in its effect to the turning of the searchlight upon a particular piece of ground. If we know beforehand that the enemy is coming from that direction, or that something is going to happen upon that field, then we have anticipated the event, as it were. It is advantageous to illuminate that particular sector brightly. Let us assume a different case, that something, for instance a noise, has turned our attention to a particular zone. Only then do we turn the searchlight upon it. Our attention did not rush on in advance of the perception, but followed it. This is the case of involuntary attention. If we drive at night along a road near New York, we may notice that a searchlight in the middle of the road is scouring the surrounding countryside uninterruptedly. It illuminates the road, is then directed to the fields, turns toward the town, and swings in a wide curve back to the road, and so repeats its circuit. This kind of activity, which is not confined to one point but is constantly scouring a wide radius, provides the best comparison with the function of free-floating attention (Reik, 1948, p. 163).

Not only did Reik replace Freud's teaching of non-directed, non-purposeful, evenly suspended attention with his own concept of the actively roaming mind scouring the field of experience for the enemy, but he reintroduced the notion of voluntary selection of "important" material.

... at certain points poised attention must be changed to voluntary or active, when the significance of a symptom or a latent relation has been recognized and it has now to be placed and evaluated. Let us return to our comparison with the searchlight. The searchlight that scour the whole foreground equally will, of course, stop at one point if the enemy is sighted there. It must be noted that what we have here is the replacement of one form of attention by another. On such occasions, the original, free-floating attention gives way to the voluntary, direct form (Reik, 1948, pp. 169-70).

Reik's revisions contributed to the tendency among analytic practitioners to overlook or ignore the implications of a specific
attentional state for the analyst as proposed by Freud. The replacement of "evenly suspended," with its suggestion of a fixed, established state of mind, by "freely floating," with the suggestion of a roaming, searching quality of mind encouraged those with an interest in analytic listening to focus their interest on the analyst's oscillation between "mere" listening and cognitive processing. Thus, current discussions of psychoanalytic listening (Freedman, 1983) emphasize the "rhythmicity" between "receiving" and "restructuring," in which the latter is characterized by "a narrowing of attention, a reduction of the possibilities aiming toward consolidation and synthesis, and an emphasis on objectification and symbolic representation" (Freedman, 1983, p. 409). This shift in emphasis has occurred at the expense of Freud's original proposals.

Generally accepted definitions of analytic attention reveal how completely this shift has been integrated.

...we believe the meaning of evenly suspended attention (or flexibly hovering attentiveness) to have come to encompass two main tasks: one task is taking in, resonating with, and conceptually ordering the communications of the analysand; the second task is listening to "ascertain what uncovered material will be constructively utilized by the patient" (Lichtenberg & Slap, 1975, p. 298).

One listens with evenly suspended, evenly hovering, free-floating attention. ... From the evenly suspended, free-floating position, the analyst can oscillate and make blendings from among his free associations, empathy, intuition, introspection, problem-solving thinking, theoretical knowledge, etc. (Greenson, 1968, p. 100).

The counterpart of the fundamental rule of free association for the patient is the therapist's free-floating attention, role-responsiveness, and openness to interactional pressures. These attitudes are an important aspect of the therapeutic ambiance offered by the therapist to the patient. They imply, to the extent humanly possible, an openness to both the manifest and derivative implications of the patient's cognitive-affective material, as well as an ability to experience pressures toward modes of relatedness, role behaviors, and self-image evocations. These latter, and the experience of interactional projections, are experienced subjectively by the therapist, worked over or metabolized toward understanding, validated in the patient's cognitive associations, and are not to be acted upon through some counterresponse to the patient; instead, they are processed toward interpretation and framework-management responses. They are inherent to the therapist's neutrality (Langs, 1982, p. 461).

Thus, Freud's original assertion that it was both possible and desirable to establish within the analyst a "state of evenly suspended attention" --a state also well detailed in long-
standing Buddhist systems of psychology—has been gradually abandoned by the majority of analysts writing on the subject. Schafer (1983) returns to Freud's original recommendations in describing the "atmosphere of safety" that such attention creates and Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984) resurrects Freud's concept in her description of how communication between patient's unconscious and analyst's unconscious is possible. Only W. R. Bion (1970) has expanded on Freud's original recommendations while remaining consistent with their original implications.

Bion describes an optimal "state of mind" or "frame of mind" in which "mental activity, memory and desire" are absent, enabling the analyst to be receptive to what is not yet known. This state is difficult to achieve but can be enhanced through "exercises" in which memories and desires are viewed as "worthless but inevitable" and are "discarded." Such exercises involve a "positive discipline," not a mere "forgetting," which leads to "receptiveness achieved by denudation of memory and desire" (Bien, 1970, p. 35).

Bion terms the practice of this "discipline" "essential" and goes on to state, "Failure to practice this discipline will lead to a steady deterioration in the powers of observation whose maintenance is essential. The vigilant submission to such discipline will by degrees strengthen the analyst's mental powers just in proportion as lapses in this discipline will debilitate them..." (Bion, 1970, p. 52).

Bien asserts that the analyst's ability to maintain the optimal state of mind is impeded by the repetitive intrusion of thoughts, memories and desires. "It is important that the analyst should avoid mental activity, memory and desire, which is as harmful to his mental fitness as some forms of physical activity are to physical fitness" (Bion, 1970, p. 42). These limitations are in turn experienced by the patient. He continues, "If the psycho­analyst has not deliberately divested himself of memory and desire, the patient can 'feel' this and is dominated by the 'feeling' that he is possessed by and contained in the analyst's state of mind, namely, the state represented by 'desire'."

Bion goes on to clarify the meaning of his terms. "Memory" is defined as all "conscious attempts at recall" (p. 70) which interfere with the apprehension of the "unknown" and yet to be discovered. "Memory," says Bion, "is a dwelling on the unimportant to the exclusion of the important." (p. 69). Filling the mind with what is already known only serves to obscure what is currently unfolding, and Bion refrains from engaging in efforts of memory as soon as he notices himself making such attempts.
When I am tempted to remember the events of any particular session I resist the temptation. If I find myself wandering mentally into the domain of memory I desist. ... If I find that I am without any clue to what the patient is doing and am tempted to feel that the secret lies hidden in something I've forgotten, I resist any impulse to remember what happened or how I interpreted what happened on some previous occasion (p. 56).

Desire is felt by Bion to be "an intrusion into the analyst's mind which covers up, disguises, and blinds him to, the point at issue... " (p. 69). Thus, desire for knowledge, security, understanding, pleasure, or the desire to be of help all interfere.

I think it is a serious defect to allow oneself to desire the end of a session, or week, or term; it interferes with analytic work to permit desires for the patient's cure, or well-being, or future to enter the mind. Such desires erode the analyst's power to analyze and lead to progressive deterioration of his intuition (ibid, p. 56).

Bion reaffirms the necessity of diligent practice to achieve the optimal attentional set.

Anyone who considers it possible to achieve a suitable frame of mind by a few minutes of psychological tidying up before starting work cannot have grasped the nature of the discipline necessary to be an analyst or the nature of the insights that become available to the analysed analyst if he brings "artificial blindness" to bear on his dark spots (p, 67).

Bien's clear implication is that a specific deployment of attention is called for in analytic work. This state of awareness must be developed through diligent discipline, just as is described within the Buddhist system, resulting in the state that Freud described wherein the attention may be maintained evenly over time.

Despite the exhortations of Freud and Bion, the general trend in the analytic literature is away from acknowledging the importance, or even the existence, of such states of mind in the analyst. Accepting Reik's assertion that attention is never evenly suspended while failing to integrate assertions in the recently introduced meditation literature that such states can be developed, the analytic community has been denied the full implementation of one of its most basic tools, the attentional set of the therapist. Given the essential similarities between the "choiceless awareness" of Buddhist meditation practices and the "evenly suspended attention" that is "free from memory and desire" of Freud and Bion, it does not seem improbable that training in the former could be adapted to suit the needs of the latter. The practice of meditation could serve as a useful...
a potent enrichment of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy tool for therapists who wish to cultivate their attentional skills so as to realize Freud's recommendations. Such a contribution from the Eastern traditions represents a potent enrichment of the Western tradition of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy—one that could ultimately be of benefit to both patients and therapists. Meditation practice which involves the steady cultivation of "bare attention" to changing objects of awareness could serve as a useful adjunct to the "self-analysis" (Freud, 1937; Ross & Kapp, 1962; Ticho, 1967; Gray, 1973) long proposed to maintain the freshness of the analytic approach. As such, it could represent an important step toward "the creation" of what Ferenczi longingly termed "a special hygiene for the analyst" (Ferenczi, 1928).

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