

# THE POWER OF ATTENTION

*Translation by Achille Cattaneo*

When I tackle a topic that I am passionate about, I always start by looking for the etymology of the terms contained in the title. This time, however, playing on the word **attention**, first I want to direct attention to another word apparently far from the topic in question, but which offers interesting ideas, that is, SIMPLE.

“Simple”, understood in a negative sense, can indicate something mediocre, trivial, obvious, expected. Sometimes when describing an object that does not convince us, of uncertain taste, we resort to the expression: “It’s a bit too simple, banal” and even in talking about a person it happens to say: “He’s a simpleton”, or even, the synonymous, not very edifying, of “silly”.

On the other hand, the positive aspect of the word simple, evokes something frank, genuine and pure. If we think of the biographies of some charismatic figures (beginning with our Assagioli), they led lives in the name of simplicity, in their way of life, in food, in clothing; I think of Ghandi with his white robe, woven by himself, the dhoti, or the white sari bordered with blue by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, without speaking of the habit of St. Francis (well known also in India). The simple lives of the friars, of the monks, of lay people, like Terzani a the Orsiglia, elected as a dwelling place of peace and quiet, and of many other people who live their lives in simplicity, in a natural way, in close contact with nature. In Florence there is the beautiful Giardino dei Semplici, meaning simple medicinal herbs, remedies, in fact natural. There would be so much more to say, but I stop here, with this little eulogy on simplicity.

What motivates me to mention of the value of simplicity? A spontaneous answer arises in me: “It would be too easy to attach to the word simple the importance of being attentive”. In fact, come to think of it: “It’s simple, just be careful to live well and not have any troubles!”. Sometimes the obviousness makes us indulge in super-

ficiality. It is easy to pay attention to crossing the road in order not to be knocked down; it’s simple, just pay attention to wear more, so as not to get cold, or be careful to watch the clock, so as not to be late, and so on, for many other situations in life. Simple becomes almost a synonym for easy, in the sense of superficiality. Another word game: “It seems easy but it is not at all simple,” to regulate, for example, our attention; too much, excessive, becomes obsession, a fixation, on an idea, on an illness, on a feeling, until it becomes delirium. Too little attention, becomes superficiality, trivialization, dispersion, both at the level of our physical energies, and in relationships, and in drawing hasty conclusions in certain situations.

Well then? Is it really easy to fix our attention on what we do? Or terribly difficult? If you were alert a few moments ago when reading, I put another term to the word simple, that is easy. I stressed that it would be too easy to call simple a whole series of things that require our attention. Easy can lead to the false belief that there is not a certain amount of commitment; to get something without effort, without application. Simple does not mean obvious, as for easy, in the sense, yes, of easy, feasible, achievable, but anyway, it always requires a certain amount of will. It’s here that this word, will, comes in, which is so dear to Psychosynthesis. Being attentive to life represents an act of will, a real commitment to ourselves, to others, to the environment, to the various interpersonal relationships. Taking responsibility for our actions, for the care of our body, for the coherence of our thoughts, for respect for interpersonal relationships; all this requires attention. How many times do we happen to say: “I did not pay attention to what I said and I ended up wounding him”, or, “I misunderstood, because I was not caring”, and again, in other situations. In short, paying attention to what we do, think, act, if it is not really a life saver, it improves our way of life, makes us present, savoring the taste even more. Often, when we eat, we are absent, distracted; we know that to feel satisfied, we must chew slowly and taste every single bite. But we are in the age of fast food.

Assagioli talks a lot about letting oneself live, more than anything else in the sense of being carried away by in-

instincts, feelings, passions, without a critical conscience or awareness. Letting oneself live, can refer to the search for an easy life, perhaps full of comforts, obtained in a free way, without effort, without commitment. Making things easy, in a regressive sense, recalls the idea of the childish situation where the omnipotent parent provides everything to the needs of the child, but when this attitude remains, it becomes an impediment to growth, to maturation, to experiences of life, to test, assay, developing skills and abilities. How many of us have had the experience of acquiring quality, resources, only through the difficulties and obstacles that life has placed on us and that never before would have been considered to be confrontable and surmountable .... I leave aside the consideration on the educational side, and not only, of easy living, would open unimaginable fronts.

However, I believe that these brief ideas help us to understand the value, the immense power of the conscious use of attention. Power as potentiality, but also as the driving force of our actions, directed towards an end, a viable goal, feasible. This is the act of will.

But we have other points to see. What is meant by attention, and how can you be careful, and again, can you develop this capacity of the mind? Does attention concern only the mental plane? Let's see!

According to the dictionary, attention means an application or concentration of the mind. In fact, some teachers often use the expression to some students "does not apply himself, he is not careful", and often this lack of attention, coincidentally approaches the other phrase, "he is lazy". This brings us back to the widespread disorder of attention deficit, a diagnosis that is often used too hastily with particularly lively children. But let's leave this subject, other scenarios would open up, such as those of the highly intuitive, imaginative children diagnosed with diagnosis of hyperactivity, who become difficult and marginalized subjects, rather than encouraged and valued by specific didactic paths.

Let's go back to the vocabulary, because in addition to mental concentration it also speaks of the sensory one. Our body also enters the field, which guides us through the senses, helps us, becomes an instrument of knowledge towards the external and internal world. We know

how the visually impaired, through other sensory sources, orient themselves and perceive physical and psychological situations in a more precise way compared to the given norms. Assagioli in fact among the various techniques to enhance the ability to self-observation, proposes the exercises of sensory evocation, auditory, tactile, olfactory, taste, as well as visual, through visualization. In fact, the practice of meditation, reflexive meditation, is also a method for developing, enhancing the mind's capacity, on what are the other components of the art of thinking: concentration and focus. But returning to the meaning of the word attention, in the etymological research we find that it derives from the Latin term, *attention-onis*, derivative of paying attention, or *turn the soul*, interesting expression!

Well, we have several points to investigate. One of these concerns the will. Psychosynthesis has studied its nature, its different meanings and the qualities that characterize it. Among these qualities we find **concentration, convergence, attention and focus**. Assagioli considers essential concentration to make an act of will effective. Concentration is achieved through attention which in turn requires directionality, persistent intentionality. It seems a bit convoluted, but in the application, we find the validity of this process. There is a piece by Roberto Assagioli which deals with the theme of concentration, I invite you to consult it and above all to put it into practice like all the techniques of psychosynthesis; it is called "Concentration", taken from a 1934 paper, and can be requested from the Centers or the Institute.

Converging, focusing, directing attention, however, depends on the interest, on the attraction that the topic causes or the purpose that we have set. It is easy to bring attention to something we like, a movie, a book, an activity we have chosen, but often it does not. When we have to pay attention to things that are far from our tastes or our choices, for example, for some, filling out the tax return, it becomes much more difficult, like studying a subject that goes beyond our usual skills. Many examples, in which an effort of will is required, a total concentration.

In this regard, Roberto Assagioli, in the above mentioned piece, writes:

“If we try to focus on some abstract topic or something that does not involve any personal interest or benefit, we find it difficult to do so, and we find that we do not really have any real dominion over our mind.”

Then he goes on to state that this finding is somewhat disheartening, even if very realistic. How can our mind then be attracted to a subject that is difficult to us, unfamiliar to our usual interests. When I was studying banking in high school, it was a real pain for me, but if I wanted to take the diploma to enroll in the Faculty of Letters (studies that I had discovered more congenial to me) I had to study it, out of love or force; I would say strength of will but also love, benevolence towards the goal that I would later achieve.

And what kind of mind are we referring to? The mind is an “animal” difficult to domesticate but at the same time an instrument of knowledge, both of the external and of the internal world. Among the various functions of the mind, in addition to the imaginative one, we find the function of thought, distinguishing it in the analytic and the synthetic one; therefore a mind that analyzes with a precise method and a synthetic mind that processes the data and gives an overall result. This also happens for the **attention** that orients the thought towards objects of knowledge of external reality, or towards internal psychic worlds (for example meditation) or even towards higher Realities, of a spiritual kind.

As we are complex, yet our bio / psycho / spiritual life is a wonderful living mechanism and to study, to know its functioning, should be considered, a privilege, an honor. “Fatti non foste a viver come bruti ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza”, as the great poet reminds us.

I realize that this theme is likely to be educational, perhaps a bit heavy and your attention is put to the test. I still ask you a few moments, however, because being attentive to life, is one of many, small, simple, secrets to feel better about yourself and others.

Giving attention, bringing attention to our living, means nurturing our psyche in a virtuous way; let us nourish ourselves for example with positive, encouraging thoughts, choose feelings that enlarge our hearts and do not restrict our coronaries like hatred, anger, violent emotions, perhaps more for those who try them, than for those to whom they are directed. Let’s nourish our-

selves with foods cooked with love, slowly and just as slowly let us enjoy them. In the process of awareness of the knowing, owning and transforming yourself, it is precisely to give attention to who we are, to how we are made, to become more masters of us and consequently to transform certain behaviors that even in good faith, maybe rather than facilitate us, instead they harm us, because of lack of attention.

How can we be careful, to strengthen this faculty of the mind? Above all when we have to apply ourselves in a field that interests us little and difficult to understand.

We have to cheat our mind a little, with the wise use of the will. This is the use of the intervention of the wise will, besides being strong and benevolent. I can force myself as much as I want to study a subject, but if I do not find the purpose, the usefulness, and I do not plan a suitable, flexible and feasible study plan, I will be able to study very little, just to give an example.

Here help us the words of Assagioli, always from the famous “Concentration” piece:

“The technique to be used to gain control over the mind and the ability to concentrate it and use it at will is to direct and keep the attention on objects that are indifferent to us that do not present any attraction for themselves. In this way we learn to keep the mind fixed, without the help of interest or personal desire. “

So the trick is in training, let’s say, in a neutral field, even far enough from the task that is more difficult to do. We make our muscles, and so, slowly, our will will be able to develop other functions as well as that of thought.

Meditation serves precisely this purpose, the right use of the mind; constancy in training, regularity, is one of the most important requirements. We are stormed by a thousand external stimuli, all to make us move away from another function of the mind, the discriminatory one. Knowing how to discriminate, requires self-observation skills, paying attention to our needs, authentic desires and not imposed from outside. To test our qualities, to overcome the fears to face life, perhaps the one that others would like to impose on us. But, take care, is our life: handle with care!