

Meditation and Emptying the Mind

Is the goal of meditation to turn off thinking and achieve an inner silence or no-mind state? Some teachers would answer yes and some would answer definitely not. Very confusing to the beginning student of meditation! Compounding the confusion is fear. Does meditation make one into a mindless zombie, subject to other's control, perhaps even vulnerable to demonic influence? Some ill-informed religious teachers even go so far as to discourage meditation, forgetting what the Bible itself says: "Be still and know that I am the Lord", "If thine eye be single, thy whole body will also be light" and so forth.

Perhaps the following will help:

The issue is not so much the presence or absence of thought activity during meditation. Rather, the issue is the degree to which ones thought activity is driven, unconscious and fixated.

The great majority of human beings are literally addicted to thinking. Even the most wretched substance abuser can go a few hours between "fixes," but most human beings cannot abide even for a few seconds without some sort of "thought fix." If there's nothing significant to think about, we fill the void with fantasy and trivia.

Simply stated, meditation breaks the addiction to thinking. One is then in a highly desirable situation. When you want to have a complete experience of hearing and feeling (for example as you listen to music), you can do so without being compulsively pulled into thoughts which are not relevant to the music. When you want to have a complete experience of tasting and feeling, as when enjoying a bite of food, you can likewise do so. On the other hand, when it is appropriate to think, you find that your thinking abilities are vastly improved. This improvement in thinking stems from two causes. The first is easy to understand. The second is a little subtle.

Breaking the compulsion to think simply means that the thinking process is no longer scattered by distracting forces. So when you turn your mind to some topic, you can penetrate that topic with great clarity and vigor. To draw a metaphor from the physical world, when thinking is no longer at the mercy of scattering forces, it becomes like a penetrating beam of coherent laser light. I'm quite convinced that this aspect of meditation makes a person a better student and problem solver and may actually raise ones IQ.

Now for the second, more subtle way that meditation improves ones thinking abilities. Here once again a metaphor may be helpful. When a person works through a compulsive eating problem, they certainly don't stop eating. In point of fact they are able to taste and appreciate their food in an entirely new way. Analogously, when a person works through the compulsive need to have answers, the answers begin to come in an entirely new way. The thinking process becomes spontaneous and intuitive. Personal and spiritual insights well up effortlessly of their own. At this point there is no need to stop the thought process in order to be in a state of meditation because the thought process itself has returned to being part of the effortless flow of nature. Because this mode of thinking is so dramatically different than ordinary congealed thought, each of the major spiritual traditions has a technical term for it. In Christianity it is called *sophia*, in Judaism, *chochma*, and in Buddhism, *prajña*.

Meditation offers two basic strategies for breaking our addiction to thought. The first is to constantly let go of distracting thoughts and return to ones focus...for example, the breath or a mantra. The second is to allow the thought to "do its thing" but to carefully observe it with detachment.

In order to better understand the thought process and how it relates to meditation, you can do an experiment. Sit down and take a minute to let your body settle. After you settle in, pay close attention to your thinking process. Your thoughts will tend to come either as internal talking, internal imaging or both at the same time. The talking may be words, phrases or whole sentences. You may hear your own voice or the voice of other people. The images may be quite clear and vision-like or just vague impressions of objects, faces and situations. Take a hands-off attitude with regard to this sequence of internal dialogues and minds-eye imagery. Give it permission to come and go, to start and stop, to speed up and slow down as it wishes. But be very alert! Every few seconds there will be new words or sentences. Every few seconds the pictures will change, perhaps slightly, perhaps totally. You may have mostly internal talking, mostly internal imaging or some mixture of both.

In order to help you be precise and matter-of-fact about this process, do the following. Each time you begin to think in words or sentences say out loud, "talking." Each time you get new pictures say out loud, "imaging." If you get both at the same time say, "both." The words and the images may continue as you note them or they may immediately die away. Either case is okay. The only goal is to be very clear at any given moment whether you're thinking in words, images or both.

After a while, if your concentration is good, you may feel like dropping the spoken labels. You can then either say the labels to yourself or just be directly aware of the categories without attaching labels. But as soon as you get spaced out or caught up, immediately reinstate the spoken labels. Of course, mentally labeling you thoughts is itself a kind of thought. This could lead to a confusing infinite regression (thinking about thinking about thinking...) However, you won't be confused if you remember this simple rule: Don't label the labels! Consider them to be a special category of artificial thought that helps you keep track of natural thought.

There may have been periods of time during which you weren't thinking and the mind was quiet and peaceful. Paradoxically when we take a hands-off attitude toward thought, not trying to suppress it but just observing it, the mind sometimes spontaneously stops of its own for a period of time.

Another possibility is that you may have been aware that you were thinking, but the thoughts were not in clear words or images. It may have been more like a background hum, the gears of the mind turning somewhere deep down, but you weren't sure (or had only a vague sense) what the topic was. We might call this kind of thinking "subtle processing." It's the preconscious or subconscious activity out of which the conscious "talking" and "imaging" arises moment by moment. Because it's a spreading wave of many rapid and fleeting subconscious associations, it is usually not possible nor necessary to know its precise content. To try to do so would be like trying to keep track of the individual droplets of water in a cloud. We can however observe the macroscopic waveform of the cloud as a whole, how it speeds up, slows down, spreads and collapses. The concept of subtle processing may be a little difficult to grasp. Basically think of it this way. If your mind is not perfectly still, but neither can you identify the thoughts in terms of clear words or images, then you're experiencing subtle processing.

Usually, but by no means inevitably, when a person first begins to meditate, they are acutely aware of the surface conscious thoughts, i.e. the ones that occur in clear images and words, especially words. As the thinking process becomes less driven, one also becomes aware of intervals of quiet and subtle processing. The mind is "fractal" structure in nature, like vegetation. After the big trees have been cut down, one becomes aware of both clear patches and the finer underbrush.

The subtle processing could also be described as embryonic thought or preconscious processing. Although it's too fleeting to observe its specific content, one can observe its "activation level," how it speeds up, slows down, gets more intense, gets less intense, moment by moment. As one observes the wave qualities of this subtle processing, giving it permission to "do its thing," it becomes unblocked and fluid.

When this happens, the deep levels of processing get energized and undulatory. This produces two desirable effects. First, it frees up our intuitive faculty. New insights well up directly from the fluid matrix of subtle processing, without having to be first processed at the conscious level. Second, the subtle processing tends to be continuous. In that sense, it is easier to observe than the words and images which tend to be sporadic and fleeting. One can rest awareness continuously on the flow of subtle processing. This allows you to experience the wave-like, vibratory nature of thought. The whole thinking process begins to soften and dissolve back into what the Bible calls "the peace that passeth understanding."

Let's take a moment to briefly review the ground we've covered. At any given moment your mind will either be still or you will be thinking. If you're thinking, the thoughts will either be conscious or not. If they are conscious, they will either be in clear words or images or both. If you are thinking but not in conscious words or images, then you are experiencing subtle processing.

The underlying theme of Mindfulness Meditation is the concept of "divide and conquer." If an experience is overwhelming you, break it up into its parts and keep track of them as they arise moment by moment. Often the separate parts are quite manageable individually, hence the aggregate experience loses its power to overwhelm you.

From time to time, most of us become overwhelmed by negative thoughts such as judgments about ourselves or others, limiting beliefs, worries and obsessions. If we can break down the negative thought as it is happening into the elements of clear talking, subtle talking, clear imaging and subtle imaging, we may find that we can observe these individual elements without getting caught in them. The negative tapes then lose much of their gripping power. They are experienced more as releases from the deep mind and less as a sufferings of the surface mind. This is catharsis in the true sense of the original Greek, which literally means "cleaning out."

As this catharsis gains momentum, the forces that cause thought to be driven, unconscious and fixated get worked through. You find that states of alert calm happen more frequently and last longer, simply because you have cleared out what gets in the way of this natural state. You are beginning to experience what the Bible refers to as "the peace that passeth understanding."