

DailyOM

Master the Path of the Peaceful Warrior

by Dan Millman

Lesson 5: The Fifth Golden Key: TAME YOUR MIND

Make Peace with the Nature of Thought

Reality is Not What We Think

We don't see the world as it is, but as we are. We view this so-called external world through a window, or filter, of our beliefs, expectations, associations, past experience, opinions and judgments. When Buddha said, "With our thoughts we make the world" he was referring to our perceptual filters -- the meanings, associations, beliefs, fears, and opinions we project on life.

The Zen masters speak of "suchness" or "isness" in which we see the world simply as it is. This experience has been described as a liberation from suffering (stress and dissatisfaction) -- in other words, a gateway to happiness. Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt, himself not a Zen practitioner, observed that "We are not prisoners of fate, but only prisoners of our own minds."

Self-Reflection on the Mind

If you are going to tame a wild horse, you had better know something about horses. The same applies to your mind. So consider the following:

- Would you describe your mind as busy or calm?
- Do you believe you have a clear grasp on reality?
- What do you do when you have troubling thoughts, such as worries, concerns, guilt, or anxieties?
- Do you believe your life would be better if you had better control over your mind?
- Have you tried to quiet your mind? What happened then?
- Do you try to think positively? Have you successfully done so with any consistency?
- Should people be held responsible for petty, jealous, negative, or sadistic thoughts or ideas?
- Would you like to live a more simple life? What might this have to do with your mind?

Anatomy of the Mind

Thoughts are the contents of the mind that pass through and color our awareness. We can deliberately think thoughts, as when we rehearse a speech, remember a shopping list, or solve a puzzle or math problem. We think in sights and sounds (sometimes using other sensory modalities such as sensation, taste or smell). Such deliberate thinking is an amazing capacity of the human mind.

However, we also have a *discursive*, filled with random thoughts that can distract, capture, or monopolize attention needed for full functioning. This is the wild "monkey-mind" that

must be tamed. Thus the advice of psychologist Will Schutz, who advised us to "Lose your mind and come to your senses!"

Thoughts arise of their own accord, in a subliminal flow. Sometimes they get your conscious attention (you notice that you are "thinking thoughts") but mostly they pass unnoticed like a subconscious stream, manifesting as subliminal whispers becoming moods, emotions, desires, and impulses. When unnoticed, they operate like hypnotic suggestions to influence your behavior. In the words of Julius Caesar, "As a rule, what is out of sight disturbs people's minds more seriously than what they see."

When you observe passing thoughts consciously, as in meditation, thoughts no longer have the power to distort your reality, control your moods, or limit your life.

Filters of the Mind

If you happen to be hungry while walking in the city, eating establishments stand out. If you need money, you see banks. As one sage observed, "If a pickpocket stands in a crowd of saints, all he sees are their pockets." (This makes me wonder what a proctologist sees.)

Having different filters, none of us see or hear exactly the same world. We view the same objects but perceive different meanings. As an incarcerated poet once wrote on a prison wall, "Two men looked out of prison bars; one saw mud and the other saw stars."

Pictures About Reality: You understand how we see reality through the filter of our own personal experience. Two people ride a roller coaster; one screams with delight, the other with terror. We might agree that an object before us is a "tree," but I might think it is beautiful; you may not.

Expectation determines perception. If you walk through a reputedly dangerous neighborhood, every large male stranger may look like a potential mugger. To the degree our perception is distorted by a filter of associations or beliefs, we experience misunderstandings and miscommunications.

Living in different subjective worlds, it seems amazing to me that we understand one another at all.

Filters and Communication

Conflicting filters tend to cause communication problems in our relationships. Case in point: Reba's teenage son, Alex, gets home from school, goes directly to the refrigerator to pay homage to the God of Food, and then crashes on the sofa, television remote control in hand, for a few minutes of space time. Enter Reba. She sees Alex and remembers that he has a big exam coming up. Reba knows that Alex is a good student, with conscientious study habits. Reba is busy with her own project, but wants to show interest in her son's life and studies, so before she returns to her own office, she says, "Hi, Alex. How are your studies coming for the history exam on Friday?"

"Get off my back, will you, Mom?" says Alex, defensively. "I'll get to my studies soon!"

Reba's intent was to show Alex that she is interested in and cares about what he is doing. When she says the words, "How are your studies coming," Alex interprets these words through his own filter, hearing, "Hey, couch potato, why are you sitting here watching 'Idiot Youth Mating Rituals' when you have WORK to do?"

As Jean Kerr wrote, "I tried communicating with you, but you were so absorbed communicating with yourself, the line was busy."

Setting aside subjective filters takes a little practice.

By coming to view reality more objectively (without the interference of our programmed

interpretations and meanings) -- clearing the "doors of perception," we come into a more immediate and intimate contact with the mystery of reality arising. Perhaps easier said than done, since we are so accustomed to the distorted windows through which we view our world and the people in it. Such distortion is clear to us in the case of people with pathological bigotry, for example, who view entire groups of people -- whether by racial or religious categories -- as "the same."

But most of us, in one form or another, operate in the world based upon assumptions rather than on direct experience. In fact there are two kinds of beliefs -- unconscious, and conscious.

Unconscious beliefs are those we mistake for truth or reality. We don't say "I believe this is so." We say, "This *is* truth." Unconscious beliefs lie at the root of fundamentalism; true believers zealously defend their beliefs and ideas as ultimate truth, confusing their opinions with the word of God. Such fundamentalism exists not only in the arena of religion, but in any field, any place, any time we are convinced that our way, our method, our ideas are universally true.

Conscious beliefs are those we recognize *as beliefs* -- as *our* truth rather than as *the* truth.

Arising thoughts are not themselves a problem -- in fact, they are quite natural, like dreams or a bubbling hot spring. Thoughts are only a problem when we *believe* them and mistake them for reality. That's why Dr. Frank Crane said, "A thought can do you more good than a doctor, banker, or faithful friend. It can also do you more harm than a brick."

Pain and Suffering: Pain is an objective, physical phenomenon; suffering is our psychological resistance to what happens. Resistance creates suffering. Stress happens when your mind resists what is. Which is why John Milton wrote, "The mind in itself, can make a heaven of hell, or a hell of heaven."

By accepting events as they occur -- not passively, but by making the best of them -- and by accepting our thoughts and feelings, we create greater ease, flow, and happiness in our lives. The most stable happiness is born not from struggling to change our world, but by taming our mind.

Liberating Attention at the Source

Many teachers in meditation traditions, who make the mind their specialty, offer techniques for "quieting the mind." The only problem is, none of them work. In fact, when we work to quiet the mind, it only seems to get busier. Typically, many beginning meditation practitioners give up the practice, believing they are not "doing it right."

Despite temporary efforts, techniques, or strategies, thoughts continue to arise. You can, however, redirect your attention so you don't pay arising thoughts "any mind," in the same way you don't hear people talking around you when immersed in a good book or TV movie.

Meditation does, however, have a number of benefits, which include:

- deep rest and relaxation, and neurological fitness;
- stabilizes blood pressure, reduces tension or anxiety
- may enhance creativity
- aids in lowering (the need to follow) addictive impulses
- a time of *physical* quietude that balance a life of activity;
- the practice of detachment (giving passing thoughts no attention);
- insight into the nature of subjective thought.

Meditation is *not*:

- a special, higher spiritual practice;
- an elevated state of being set apart from everyday life;
- an exclusively Eastern, esoteric, mystical, or religious exercise;

Life is not lived in a sitting position. Thus, there are forms of moving meditation -- *paying attention* to how you walk, eat, breathe, exercise, make love, or tie your shoes. In fact, the essence of meditation is paying attention -- becoming the witness, or pure awareness, observing from a detached place all that arises, within or without.

Formal, sitting meditation can become a special or sacred practice, devoting attention exclusively to "just sitting." Even sitting for only one minute -- say, after a workout and shower -- can make a positive addition to the rhythms of your day. (Remember that a little of something is better than a lot of nothing.)

How to Meditate

- Sit in a balanced, stable, comfortable posture with your spine straight and your shoulders relaxed, eyes closed -- or half open but unfocused (experiment). Tongue lightly and naturally resting on the roof of your mouth.
- Feel your belly-area expand with the inhale, and relax back with each exhale.
- Choose an object of attention. It may be a mantra (internal word or sound repeated regularly or at random) -- or you can attend to the act of counting one-to-ten, or watching your breath, or focusing on a visual image (internal or external), or attending to internal or external sounds -- or, in the fundamental practice called mindfulness or insight meditation (vipassana), simply noticing whatever arises in your field of awareness without clinging to anything.
- There are different, and equally valid, views on how long to sit. Some say as long as you are interested in sitting. Others say set a definite time, perhaps setting a timer with a bell. You may wish to set a minimum time such as ten or twenty minutes -- or start with three to five minutes, and work up from there if you wish. Experiment as you would for any other practice.

Thoughts will continue to arise, but will then fade into the background as you gently return your attention to the mantra, breath, image, or sound. The body relaxes into a sense of silent timelessness.

The complete practice of meditation involves a three-fold process of (1) attention, (2) insight, and (3) surrender. Surrender means letting go rather than clinging to what arises in your awareness -- images, sounds, feelings, physical sensations, insights, fantasies, fears, joys, sorrows.

This is easier said than done. Perhaps you've seen the highly disciplined Buckingham Palace Guards in England, who stand gazing directly ahead, with a sober expression on their faces despite the children who try to distract them. In meditation, your awareness is like the Palace Guards, and your thoughts are like these children, doing all they can to get your attention. Remain on guard, at your post!

The beauty of insight meditation is that you can do it any time, in everyday life, with your eyes open, using whatever task is at hand as your meditative object. This is the key to understanding all Zen arts, including serving tea, arranging flowers, calligraphy, archery, swordplay and other martial arts. All are forms of meditation. In fact, anything you do in daily life with real attention is a means to tame your mind.

Daily Life Assignment:

A One-Minute Meditation: This simple exercise offers a powerful way to reset your attention and regain your balance -- taming your mind in the moment -- a kind of instant meditation in the midst of everyday life. Do the following:

At any point in your day, especially when things get frantic or stressed, take a deep breath and practice *one minute* of meditation -- a moment of feeling-attention, of release, as if you find yourself on a mountain top looking down on the world below. Give a brief thanks for the privilege of living another day.

Can We Control Our Thoughts?

When you are worried about something, does it work to tell yourself to just stop worrying? Can you (or anyone) stop thinking about something (or hold another thought in your mind) whenever you will yourself to do so? Due to what we have learned in a book or seminar, many of us might answer, "Yes -- if I practice." Well, maybe -- let's try it out.

EXERCISE:

For the next sixty seconds, focus on any object in your environment. And think of nothing at all except the object you are gazing at. Try this now, before reading any further.

You were likely able to continue *staring at the object* -- a physical action, under your control -- but were not able to will yourself not to think any thoughts for sixty seconds? Or even twenty seconds? If you were paying close attention, you may have noticed that in a matter of a few seconds, your attention drifted elsewhere -- to other thoughts, impressions, images, or internal dialogue.

Such thoughts are constantly bubbling up in the cauldron of the psyche. You notice them or not, depending on where your attention is otherwise focused. While you *can* learn to direct your attention in a limited way, you will never control arising thoughts themselves.

Banishing Bad Thoughts: You have the ability to use your active imagination to picture a ripe, delicious apple instead of thinking about someone with whom you are angry. But for how long?

Thoughts are like bubbles in the sea -- you may cup your hands and hold some underwater, but eventually they rise to the surface. Practices such as counting your breaths or reciting a particular prayer or mantra create a moment-to-moment concentration on one idea to the exclusion of others. But such muscular practice has its limits.

Taming the mind has nothing to do with thinking only positive thoughts, or banishing negative ones, or quieting the mind (in any lasting way).

The mind is, after all, like a barking dog -- you don't have to get rid of the dog (or banish undesirable thoughts). Just stop letting them control your behavior. Let your thoughts be whatever they are, positive or negative, and get on with life. Learn self-compassion; make peace with your mind.

This is the highest form of meditation -- as you truly realize:

- Thoughts are only the play of light on a movie screen. While thoughts may, like a movie, stimulate laughter or tears, they have no intrinsic reality.
- Although we can distract yourself or temporarily direct our attention elsewhere, we cannot control our thoughts.
- Most important, *since we cannot control them, we are not responsible for our thoughts*, whether they are positive or negative. How can you be responsible for thoughts or comets or sunspots or for anything else you cannot control?

You can only control your behavior -- your response to your thoughts. So taming the mind does not depend upon your skill in meditation. But it is dependent on seeing the subjective or discursive mind for what it is -- an illusion. Irritating, seductive, fascinating, demanding, but an illusion just the same.

Meditation can help us to notice the constant stream of this wild-mind, these random impressions. But there is another practice, fully integrated with the course of your daily life, that you can do anywhere, at any time.

Return to the Present

Whether or not you engage in the practice of meditation, one of the most practical and useful means of taming the mind is bringing attention back to the present moment -- back to reality.

Only now exists. Past and future are illusion and exist only as memory or imagination. Your body lives here and now. The mind pretends to be a time machine, taking you from past to future, but past and future are illusions. Now is the only reality.

Living the Simple Life: It is entirely possible to live a full, busy, and varied life in the city yet experience a sense of simplicity when your attention rests in the present moment. In my life as a professional writer and lecturer who travels widely and receives much correspondence and many demands, I must attend many things; yet my life is quite simple since I made peace with this simple reality: *I can do only one thing at a time.* The same is true for you.

The Three-Question Wake-Up Call: Whenever you are "suffering" due to attention's tendency to drift to past regrets or future anxieties, do the following:

Direct your attention back to the body, back to this moment, by asking yourself three internal questions:

(1) Am I breathing? (Take a conscious breath.)

(2) Am I relaxed? (Let go of any tension you notice.)

(3) Am I moving with refinement and grace? (Allow yourself to do so.)

These questions are signposts pointing back to present reality. You can only think about something in the past or future; the present moment is the moment of silence, the moment of truth.

The quality of your moments becomes the quality of your life. We tame our minds by attending to the present moment. This moment deserves your full attention, for it will not pass your way again.

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