

# Shrink Rap: Taming the Monkey Mind, Part I

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A vexing psychological reality that almost everyone wants to minimize is this: More often than not, we're not in control of our own mind. By this I mean our thoughts have a mind of their own. We all know this is true, and can experience it vividly when we practice forms of meditation, or other cognitive centering techniques aimed at helping us learn to slow down, observe and control the mental stream. It's true even for the brightest and most accomplished, who still manage to harness the power of their thought and attention well enough to achieve amazingly creative things in the various disciplines of life.

In the Hindu culture, the conscious mind is viewed like a monkey, chattering away, as it jumps around from one associative thought to another. From the moment we awaken to our final thought before falling asleep, we live with this chattering monkey, doing our best to tame it so that we may function and be productive. And the chattering surfaces again in our dream world, in a more disorganized and uncontrollable fashion.

When our mind wanders, our attention turns from what is in front of us. We are swept away into fantasy stories that arise in quick images and fragmented associations. When we return to the present, we're often unable to trace precisely where we've been. We've "spaced out" and feel momentarily disoriented. We get lost in the past or future, re-playing a scene that occurred or rehearsing an encounter coming up in the near future. We "day dream" deliberately and effortlessly, while our car hurtles through space at 70 mph and as we realize we've missed our freeway exit.

If you think controlling your desires and cravings is tough, try controlling your thoughts. Since thought associations are far more subtle and fast-moving, they are much tougher to "catch" than grosser emotional states. If I ask you what you're feeling, you can probably tell me you're sad. But it's not so easy to trace back what mental associations led you to your awareness of sadness. You may think sadness just appeared, without your thoughts having had anything to do with it. Think again.

In addition to controlling emotions, one reason we're in search of cognitive-behavioral strategies and biochemical solutions that will help us harness our cravings is because the mind has such a tough time controlling these powerful urges.

A jingle, tune or memory comes into our mind and sticks around for a few hours or days. We don't ask to become obsessed by it but just are. Or we think of someone we're fond of and can't stop thinking about them, no matter how hard we try. Telling ourselves not to think about them only makes us think about them more. Or we try to answer an existential question like "What's the meaning of life?" or "What happens when I die?" and find ourselves branching off into all kinds of memories, feelings and beliefs in search of an answer. All of these are examples of how hard it is to control the monkey mind.

I'm convinced the single most difficult and powerful thing for us to do is control the flow of contents of our own mind. Try this: Every time you notice your mind wandering off in fantasy, see if you can identify where it goes. Follow it closely. When you snap out of it, make a mental note of where you've just been. This is important because without knowing where you've gone, significant chunks of time are being sucked into a mental black hole.