

Shrink Rap: Taming the Monkey Mind, Part II

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

Originally published in *Coast Magazine*, July 2007

Truth be told, I've spent thousands of hours sitting on a meditation cushion in the half-lotus position. And I've published dozens of articles and a book on meditation and its relationship to psychotherapy. I offer this background not because I'm shamefully immodest but to make my experience and bias clear: I'm a big fan of meditation in its various forms. Here are some of the benefits of practice:

1. Most forms of sitting and moving meditation, when practiced earnestly, help calm the internal chatter and physical agitation associated with the stresses of daily life. Mentally, this occurs through learning to notice, slow down, and even cut off thoughts entirely, resulting in less obsessing. The ability to return to the present is heightened, so we spend less time lost in rumination. With less rumination, it's easier to flexibly "shift gears" from one topic or activity to another.

Physically, the body is quieted through deepening the breath and slowing the pulse, heart rate and brain waves. This stilling of the body spills over into our everyday habits, so we experience less muscle tension and waste less energy. With further experience, this equanimity is disturbed only by more aggravating and prolonged problems. When we feel and express anger, we get over it much faster. Anxiety about the unpredictable future is also lessened.

2. In Part 1, we said the chattering mind creates a sense of being out of control; we struggle to engineer what often feels like a runaway train. Some forms of meditation are specifically geared toward helping identify, clarify and feel more in control of our thoughts. Enhanced clarity means seeing more associations between thoughts, leading to more insight into the motivation for our actions. Our "train of thought" stays on track. This leads to less confusion and better decision-making.
3. The ability to create a mental space between thoughts or feelings and actions. By "space" I mean the gap between the awareness of an impulse to do something and the decision to actually go ahead and do it. "Minding the gap" results in fewer impulse-driven actions.

The creation of mental space enhances our ability to notice anxiety, fear or anger, but not feel compelled to act on them; it means thinking things but refraining from saying them. Meditation encourages a turning inward and a reflective inquiry into our lives, which facilitates appreciating simple everyday pleasures. It also makes us more acutely aware of our precious existence right here and now.

4. A stronger sense of trusting our own judgment. Since we are on "speaking terms" with the various parts of ourselves, we feel more confident in performing and trusting our own analysis. There is less interference by nagging self-doubt. This means we are more comfortable taking contrarian positions and assessing issues without relying so heavily on the opinions of others. We are less swayed by the tug of friends, family, and the media and feel less pull to have our conclusions confirmed by others.
5. Improved concentration is one of the most direct and immediate benefits of meditation practice. Concentration is sharper and endures over a longer period. We learn to stay attentive to and immersed in mental activities for hours at a time with minimal distraction. This results in less boredom and careless decision-making. Fewer errors are made from lapses of concentration, both in judgment and inattentive behavior.