

mind

EFFORTLESS



MEDITATION

*by peter russell*



**Y**ou may be surprised to hear that meditation should be effortless, that no striving or concentration is needed. I know I was. When I first became interested in meditation, back in the mid-sixties, I was repeatedly told that it took great mental discipline and many years of practice. Indian teachers had likened the mind to a wagon-load of restless monkeys that needed to be tied down and kept quiet.

And my experience appeared to confirm it. My mind was full of thoughts, and try as I may, I could not keep them at bay. Like many others, I naturally assumed that I was not trying hard enough; I needed greater mental discipline, not less.

Then I chanced upon Transcendental Meditation. Its teacher, the Maharishi of Beatles fame, challenged the whole notion of trying to control the mind. The monkeys, he pointed out, were wanting something—more bananas perhaps. Give them what they want and they

will settle down of their own accord. So with the mind; it is restless because we are seeking something. And what is it we are seeking? In the final analysis, we all want to feel better—to be happier, more at peace, at ease, fulfilled, content. He argued that if we give the mind a taste of the inner contentment it is looking for, it will be attracted to it and begin to settle down of its own accord.

This made more sense to me than what I'd come across so far, so I learned his practice. And it worked. I found my mind becoming quiet without any effort. Indeed, as soon as I inadvertently started trying to control the process, in the hope that I could somehow help my meditation along, it did not work so well.

Now, I am not suggesting that this applies to every type of meditation. Techniques designed to cultivate particular mental skills or states of mind may well involve a degree of concentration or mental discipline. But when

it comes to the basic skill of relaxing into a quieter state of mind, effort generally turns out to be counter-productive.

A quiet mind is not a state of mind to be achieved. It is the state we experience when there is nothing to be achieved. It is the mind in its natural condition, untarnished by fears and desires, and the thoughts they create. When everything is OK in our world, we feel OK inside; we are at ease.

Or rather, that is the way it should be. Yet, even when all our physical needs are met, and there is no immediate threat or danger, we seldom feel totally at ease. More often than not, it's the very opposite. Leave us with nothing to do, and most of us start getting bored. If someone upsets us, we may hold a grievance for days, weeks, or even years later. Or we may spend hours worrying about situations that could occur, but seldom do.

Along with such feelings comes an almost endless procession of thoughts. Most of them boil down to worries about how we can be

more content; yet, ironically, a worried mind is, by definition, discontent. This is the sad joke about human beings. We are so busy worrying whether or not we are going to be at peace in the future, we don't give ourselves the chance to be at peace in the present.

Given how easily such thoughts spring up, it is easy to assume they must be subdued and controlled. But that approach stems from the same belief that created them—the belief that we need to be in control of things in order to feel at ease.

Thus the advice that occurs repeatedly in a variety of meditation traditions is:

1. When you realize you have been caught in a thought, accept the fact. Don't judge or blame yourself. It happens, even to the most experienced meditators.
2. Instead of following the thought, as you might in normal life, gently shift your attention back to some experience in the present

moment. In Transcendental Meditation that may be the thought of a mantra, in mindfulness the sensation of the breath, or in other practices perhaps a visual image or a feeling of love.

3. Let the attention rest in that experience. Don't try to concentrate or hold it there. Ah yes, you will be sure to wander off again. But the practice is not so much learning how to stay present, but how to return to the present. If you wander off a hundred times, that is a hundred opportunities to practice gently returning your attention to the present.

Even then, trying and effort can arise in subtle ways. Maybe if I just added this or focused on that, it would be easier. Some of it is so subtle that we don't even notice we are doing it. A faint resistance to an experience perhaps. Even a slight wanting to have a good meditation can get in the way.

Over my forty years of teaching meditation, I have found the greatest challenge for students is to let go of all effort. They can't quite believe that they really do not need to try at all. Sometimes, even the most experienced meditators, with years of practice, may still put a slight effort or control into their practice. Once they let go completely they begin to appreciate how effortless it can be and find themselves dropping even more easily into a state of inner silence.

**Peter Russell** *Peter Russell is a writer and speaker on consciousness, self-development, contemporary spirituality, science, and sustainability. He believes that our critical challenge is to free human thinking from the limited beliefs and attitudes that lie behind so many of our problems—personal, social, and global. Visit his website and meditation course here: [peterrussell.com](http://peterrussell.com), [peterrussell.com/meditate](http://peterrussell.com/meditate)*

