

One Meditation #9, September 2025: “The Elephant in the Room” (Aug. 29, 2025, 600 w.)

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Welcome to this ninth meditation email and thank you for being here. Please consider sharing it. Monthly subjects range from modern to ancient, Western to Eastern, and scientific to spiritual. For more info, see below. – Richard

MEDITATION: “THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM”

In meditation, the elephant fills our head until its trumpeting is all we hear. What is the elephant? It is our uncontrolled thoughts: meandering, distracted thinking, sometimes called “monkey mind” because it jumps around. The opposite, says Richard Rohr in *Silent Compassion*, is silence: “nothingness, emptiness, vastness, formlessness, open space, etc.”

Monkey Mind

What, exactly, is normal mental thinking? Psychologist Lev Vygotsky defined “inner speech” in the 1930s as an often-mixed shorthand of brief words, images, and sometimes feelings: e.g., “I should buy groceries today” might become “Buy!” with a picture of the store. In addition, research suggests a typical human attention span lasts about five to fifteen seconds. Often, between spans, one thought changes to another.

In a 2010 report in *Science*, Harvard researchers Killingsworth and Gilbert discovered that most people spend about 47% of their waking time thinking about something other than what they are doing. The authors also found that “a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. [Humans’] ability to think about what is not happening...comes at an emotional cost.” In addition, Rohr speculates in “Contemplation vs. Stinking Thinking” that 82% or more of human thought is “repetitive and useless.”

What happens when we slow or pause our monkey mind? Buddhist Sara Shaw says in *Tricycle Talks* (14 Aug. 2025), “When the mind can settle, a great joy and happiness can arise.” Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew writes in *A Map to Mercy* that for weeks after an intense dream encounter with death, “the silence was so near all I needed was a walk in the woods or ten minutes on my knees to be saturated again. Quiet mind, beating body. Welcome

dissolution. Rest unlike any I'd known. Freedom. Peace. Tender, vibrating presence" (1).

Even simple mental calmness is good. Hundreds of scientific studies show that engaging in it lowers heart rate and blood pressure, and decreases stress and anxiety.

Pausing the Wandering Mind

Here are some meditation methods for reining in or replacing your monkey mind.

1. **Allow some thoughts.** Distracted thinking is the problem, not all thoughts. When not meditating, enlightened people walk, eat, breathe—and question, plan, write, and create. Even in meditation, say the *Yoga Sutras*—founding scriptures of yoga—you can enter the clear-mind state of *samadhi* “with seed”—meaning some thoughts still may be present.
2. **Just observe.** As you meditate, let thoughts be passing clouds. Mindfully watch; don't react. When more thoughts inevitably slip through, return to observing.
3. **Block distracted thinking.** Some people meditate by focusing on an image: for example, an imagined or real flower. Others chant, hum, sing, or concentrate on an energy point in or above them. Mindful exercise or self-massage also may work.
4. **Breathe.** Hundreds of scientific studies report the benefits of deep breathing in meditation. A recent study suggests that for this to work, you should use at least an eight-second cycle of inhaling and exhaling combined.
5. **Be in nature.** Abide with it in its own peace, awareness, and bliss. Breathe it in. Recordings of nature, says recent research, also may help.
6. **Remember silence.** Treasure calmness. Meditate upon it the next time.
7. **Become love.** Historically, meditation most often has been guided by the warm, inner embers of love: a gentle but strong physical sensation building within that burns away thought.

Using several methods at once also may help. I often combine love, a focus point, breath control, humming, and nature. As Rohr notes in *Silent Compassion*, “Silence is a kind of being itself.... The dualistic [always thinking] mind goes...crazy and bored with that much silence and solitude. The non-dual mind cannot get enough.”

Next Month: CAN EXERCISE BE MEDITATION?

Peace, Strength, Joy

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Previous Issues

Jan.-May 2025, #1-5: See "Meditation" in richardjewell.org.

June '25, #6: "**Buddha's Five Waters—Which Are You?**" In Buddhism, the five Hindrances—five inner waters—are resolved in the Seven Factors of Awakening. **Recommended:** Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*.

July '25, #7: "**Lone Rider or Wagon Train?**" Do you meditate alone, as part of a community, or both? **Recommended:** Riane Eisler, *The Chalice & the Blade*.

Aug. '25, #8: "**Which To Choose: Meditation or Protest?**" Doing both without loss of time is possible. **Recommended:** Daniel Wolpert, *Looking Inward Living Outward: The Spiritual Practice of Social Transformation*
