

Take Back *Monkey Mind*

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I remember being in the jungle in Guatemala, looking up at the lush canopy of overgrowth and being mesmerized by spider monkeys swinging gracefully from branch to branch. I never knew where each monkey would go next or how they would move. This seemed like freedom and it looked good to me. So how then did *monkey mind* get such a bad rap in the meditative and mindfulness world?

I purposely titled this piece “Take Back *Monkey Mind*” in keeping with a cultural tradition of changing the meaning and communication of previously denigrated words. Terms such as *queer*, *weird*, *tree hugger* and *redneck* have been re-appropriated by the respective groups. These words are “taken back” with more positive regard and a different understanding

All thoughts are not the same, just like all monkeys are not the same. You never can be sure where a thought will lead, just like I never knew where the monkey would swing. This can be both liberating and terrifying, or a little of both and everything in between. At times, when your thoughts are going round and round caught in a groove, you feel more like you’re going round on a hamster wheel. Rather than experiencing something reminiscent of the freedom of monkeys in the wild, you feel caged.

It is only possible to take back these terms when we feel better about ourselves and our experience. Taking back these words can actually transform disdain into more friendliness for our experiences. Let’s take a look at what’s behind the views around *monkey mind*.

Maybe one of the big problems with *monkey mind* is how we relate to it.

You might believe that you should not think in meditation. Searching the web for “monkey mind” I found the following warning: “THINKING CAN CAUSE SERIOUS HARM TO YOU AND TO THOSE AROUND YOU!” (and this was put in all capital letters just like the Surgeon General’s warning about smoking). When this is your idea about thinking in meditation, then it’s impossible to learn about it and from it. When this is our view of meditation, we inevitably see thoughts as more bars on the cage.

Trying not think in meditation will lead to some degree of self-hatred. It might feel more subtle than self-hatred, more like telling yourself “I’m not a very good meditator” or “meditation isn’t for me because I can’t stop my thoughts.”

Human beings think, and, at times those thoughts come fast and furiously. When the thoughts are interesting and creative, it’s easy to feel good about them, especially once you understand that thinking in meditation is inevitable and can be beneficial. Thoughts that are driven by fear and anxiety are harder to tolerate. It’s much easier to look another way when you can. I understand the simple desire to stop this kind of thinking and get some quiet and relief and it

might just work for a while. More likely, whatever been disturbing you will return, or will be repressed and distorted into other problems.

When we don't kill the monkey, something unexpected can happen. When we develop tolerance and interest in thinking, it slows down, and at times *monkey mind* seems to disappear just like that monkey hiding out behind a thick branch. Maybe this is not so surprising. When we don't want something or disdain it, it can become bigger and more insistent.

When thinking quiets in a natural, unforced way it becomes a wonderful respite. This respite comes without trying and it has all the benefits of calm states in meditation that come from intentionally quieting thoughts. As we develop tolerance for *monkey mind*, we discover that it naturally runs out of steam and comes to an end— at least for the short run.

When you're able to look into complex, and at times difficult thought patterns, you'll learn more about them. You will start to disentangle them and, over time they change. My experience has taught me that this is the most reliable way to be freed from thoughts that entrap us— in the long run. Your wild creative mind becomes a kind and wise teacher.