



Still the mind

The benefits of meditation are well known but how can you tune out the many distractions both outside and inside your head?

A car engine purrs into life. A neighbour is banging the front door shut. There's an itch just above your ankle bone, where the sock meets the skin. Why is it that when you're sitting down to meditate, the outside world becomes far more interesting than the one inside? And if you're not nagged by outside distractions, it's the noise in your head that's calling your attention away.

The good news is you're not alone. Even after six years of meditating daily, I still struggle to manage my restless 'monkey mind'. Sitting doing nothing can be difficult on a physical and mental level. I find it hard to be seated cross-legged and often resort to lying down, only to find myself falling asleep. So, I sit up. And I fidget. And I get frustrated.

Reassuringly, meditation expert Emma Mills, author of *Inhale Exhale Repeat*, says these feelings are common, for both beginners and experienced meditators. 'Many people can only manage two minutes before they feel the need to move, and that's fine. Find your limit then build on it, doing five minutes, then 10 minutes. Meditation shouldn't be a marathon.

'Consider having a settle-in time,' she suggests. 'Wait a minute and listen. It won't take you long to become aware of yourself. Then try to connect the mind and body. I like to gently tap my body: using my fingertips on my hips, collarbone,

arms and jaw. Or I might try some gentle stretching. If you do start to fidget, simply observe this. Be interested in it. Watch yourself, then move on. If you get cross and frustrated, observe this as well.'

Calming the chatter

If you're carving out even a few minutes to meditate every day, well done. Congratulate yourself for getting over the first hurdle. It's easy to use the excuse of being too busy. And remember that just because you've stopped, it doesn't mean your mind will do the same. In fact, when you sit and listen, thoughts can turn from a gentle grumble to a thunderous rumble. In one 30-minute session you can have upwards of 300 thoughts. This is normal. Sometimes when you're stressed, you don't feel like meditating because your mind is so crowded. Even thinking about these thoughts as clouds passing over an azure sky, or leaves floating on the surface of a bubbling stream, might not work.

London-based meditation teacher Maggie Richards advises not chasing your thoughts. 'Milarepa, an 11th-century Tibetan sage, said: "When you follow your thoughts, you are like a dog chasing a stick – every time a stick is thrown, you run after it. Instead, be like a lion who, rather than chasing

after the stick, turns to face the thrower. One only throws a stick at a lion once.'" Maggie adds: 'Know that such thoughts are your "lower self" trying to distract you. Patiently and lovingly practise allowing them to pass. In not giving them energy, they will eventually get the message and leave you in peace.'

Listen to yourself

Even the knowledge that meditation can reduce anxiety, improve cognition, boost self-esteem and foster kindness are not in themselves always enough to stymie the mind on the mat. In fact, this can bring its own anxieties. 'Am I doing it right? Is this working? Should I be feeling something by now?' These are all common questions that can pop into the mind while you're meditating.

'It's easy to think it's not working because you feel exactly like you did a few minutes ago, except your eyes are closed,' says Emma. 'Don't expect lightning, a shift in state or some higher level of consciousness. Instead, witness these questions. Make a note to deal with them later. Look at your expectations and ask yourself why you are doing this. In the moment, note them – "Ah, this is me worrying about whether this is working again" – laugh at them and move on.'

But what about that purring car engine? Unless you're a hermit, finding a peaceful place to sit can be difficult. However, it's a myth that everyone has to meditate in silence and, in fact, bringing mindfulness into your everyday life is an important part of the practice, a living meditation, if you like.

Just as with thoughts, acknowledge the outside noises and move on. 'Meditation is like a muscle,' says Emma. 'We build it up on the good days, and then on the ones when it's noisy

or hard to focus, it will be easier. Meditation has a cumulative effect. And if sitting down isn't working, aim for any quiet time on your own, such as when you're boiling a kettle or if you go for a walk. Even three conscious breaths are enough.'

Maggie is in agreement: 'It's better to meditate deeply for, say, 10 minutes than stay at the surface of your consciousness for an hour and let your lower mind have its way with you. Eventually, it will be possible to go so deep into your magical inner world that nothing external ruffles you.'

Reflecting calm

While finding a moment to yourself and becoming more aware of this moment is central to meditation, self-care can seem selfish. Why sit for 10 minutes when there's a pile of washing to be done, emails to be answered or a family member who needs your help? 'Your perception colours everything you do – the way you respond, the way you look at life – and this response has an effect on everyone else,' Emma explains. 'We think that the outside world is separate from our inner one, but it is not.'

'If you have a happy, calm and loving atmosphere inside you, it will be reflected out. It will help you be more patient, more present with family and the rest of the world. Doing meditation is actually one of the most caring things you can do for yourself and others.'

Words: Alice Whitehead

If you'd like to find out more about meditation, visit emmamillslondon.com and maggierichards.co.uk.