WORKING WITH A RESTLESS MIND

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BHAGAVAD GITA 6:35

What Does It Mean if I Can’t?

“It is true that the mind is restless and difficult to control,” Krishna says to Prince Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, acknowledging in a beautiful, down-to-earth way the fluid and constantly moving nature of our minds, “but it can be conquered, Arjuna, through regular practice and detachment.” I would abandon the words “control” and “conquer,” and rewrite this instruction for today with different...
words. Typical of the Bhagavad Gita, however, if the reader focuses on the application of “regular practice” and “detachment,” neither control nor conquering will be of any interest anyway. Be committed to your schedule but not to the outcome, is how I understand it.

Nevertheless, you may encounter times when it is difficult to stay with your practice. “If you can’t practice, perhaps it means you ought not to for a while.” I remember giving this counsel to a student who was going through both fear and grief because she hadn’t been able to meditate for several weeks (which I discuss further in chapter four with pointers for what you may expect when you begin a regular practice). I remember the amazement on her face when I said the words to her that had helped me so much when I was stuck: “Nothing terrible will happen if you don’t meditate.” It had not occurred to her that it would be OK to stop for a while, or that it might be exactly the relief she needed: to take a break and let it pass. In time, she came back to her practice with less pressure to perform perfectly and more freedom to deviate from the schedule, and even to break free from it entirely from time to time. I encouraged her to create her own practice schedule and to make up her own curriculum for meditation practice. Again she was relieved because she had felt constricted by
what she considered to be a “right way to do it” and hadn’t imagined it could be possible to make it up from scratch for herself. We jokingly agreed to stop being concerned about imaginary meditation police on the lookout for protocol violators.

When students have difficulty with fluctuations in practice, I sometimes recommend a remedy that worked very well for me. I keep my appointment with meditation, but I let myself do anything I want during the allocated time: read a book, complete a Sudoku puzzle, anything. I just show up at the same time and the same place, if possible, because showing up there and then does something to sustain the momentum of my practice, even if I am not going to practice meditating for a while. Momentum is created by routine. “Same time, same place” is a formula for good results with meditating. There was a period of time when I meditated in a particular chair at a certain time. After a while, I could not look at the chair without thinking “meditate” and breathing a little deeper. After a longer while, it just didn’t seem OK to sit in that chair to watch TV. I was beginning to build an attitude of devotional awareness associated with that chair. It made me think of a documentary I saw on the art of tea drinking that described how teapots and cups over centuries of use
become more valuable because of the way regular use impacts them.

**Expect the Unexpected**

Studying and practicing meditation has been filled with unexpected learning and surprising benefits. In retrospect, some of the benefits seem reasonable to associate with meditation, but others were truly surprises and some were even unpleasant. I didn’t expect—and frankly didn’t enjoy—encountering disappointment, difficulties, and growing pains along the way of learning to sit in blissful peace.

Among benefits that were pleasant is that the practice itself became easier and easier, most likely because of the regularity with which I practiced. That being the nature of practice: over time, with sustained and repeated engagement, things just get easier through rhythmic repetition and regularity. As I got into the routine of things, a sense of confidence and familiarity arose and I began to know what to expect from the practice. At least that is what I thought. The regular practice—it seemed—was laying down the foundation for something larger to rest on. Without the foundation of regular practice, the subtleties of si-
lence couldn’t be revealed. I also noticed with delight that I actually was becoming less and less attached to expectations of the practice. I was simply enjoying doing it. It was helpful to read the plainly stated acknowledgement in the Bhagavad Gita that the mind is truly difficult to control. It helped me calm down about the times when I didn’t feel like meditating, or when I broke my routine, or couldn’t get into the mood to be still. It helped me feel less like I was the only person in history who had a restless mind, and more forgiving about coming back gently to the practice when I was able. With this generosity toward my weaknesses, I encouraged myself to keep at it, and became better and better and better at keeping my appointment with sitting.

Among the unpleasant effects is that sometimes, without warning, without logical explanation, meditation would become impossibly hard to do. I would experience sitting in meditation to be like sitting in a major traffic jam: no movement and no escape. I would sometimes have the thought that I had been catapulted back to the very beginning of my practice, and it felt frustrating. I was grateful that my musician’s background had equipped me to frame this within the filter of my music practice experience. There were days in which the instrument I loved to play, the very one that seemed to be like an extension of my hands, would
feel awkward, like an alien object absent instructions. At such times, forcing through practice seemed to make things worse, whereas stepping away from the instrument for a while created the space I needed for matters to regain their balance.

Fixed Ideas

The student who was struggling with her practice was stressed because she was trying to conform to a previously learned idea of how to practice that was too strict and she couldn't let go of it. Rigid ideas about how to practice, or about anything for that matter, can get in the way of progress. Sometimes we begin studying something and even though we are new to the subject, we nevertheless may bring with us fixed ideas we picked up from others. Such fixed ideas may come from a teacher who has found a method that works, but who does not have the flexibility to adapt the method to students' needs. Sometimes the fixed ideas come from our culture and from the people who are our role models. When I was a young man, I somehow picked up the idea that meditation was something otherworldly, mystical, and possibly dangerous, and maybe for that reason, deeply interesting to me. These ideas were so strong in me that they got in the way of the normal and
quite naturally nurturing experience that sitting still and being quiet produces. I was expecting something else. These expectations had to be set aside gently before I could make significant progress.

Once I discovered I had fixed ideas about meditation, it became easier to identify similarly fixed ideas about other practices such as prayer, for example—ideas that kept me stuck in the past and prevented me from establishing a prayer practice. I had to do the same letting go of old ideas about what prayer is that I did with meditation. Prayer, like meditation, I discovered—contrary to my early religious upbringing—exists in many diverse forms; there is no right way or wrong way to pray. It is a ludicrously impossible position to support that there is only one way to practice spirituality.

As I softened my opinion about what prayer is, I began to notice that I was attached to an idea that prayer had to be eloquent, filled with words of a near perfect poetic form. I had to let go of that, and when I did, I started to encounter prayer in a variety of forms, some of which crossed the boundary between meditation and prayer in that they were as much about the silences between words as they were about actual word-concepts; as much about movement as they were about being still. I got to liberate my childhood concept of prayer and entertain newer ideas. I accomplished
this in part through sitting in meditation and examining my thoughts about prayer. I sat with questions such as “Does prayer require you to get on your knees?” “Whose attention am I attempting to get with prayer?” “What is prayer for?” “To whom is prayer addressed?” Soon after I began examining my concepts of prayer during meditation, I started to notice and appreciate all kinds of prayer, some with strict numbers of recitation, others with movements, some on knees and others not. If you choose one of these methods, that’s just great, and you’re not off track if you don’t pray in a particular way. I know that now, and that confident knowing, I believe, came from meditating. Effective prayers are, in my opinion, the ones that are truly personal, so trust yourself because your honest attempt will lead you to an authentic experience.

The point is, whether you are learning how to pray or how to meditate, by abandoning fixed ideas about how it ought to be and adopting a simple attitude of exploration, you will be helping yourself toward satisfying progress. A fixed idea is one that is rigid and inflexible, and it affects everything around it because of its “stuckness.” I imagine that you can call to mind an idea of your own that is pretty much fixed. An idea, for example, that no matter what anyone else tells you, and even if you know your idea isn’t fully
supportable, you will stay true to it, through thick or through thin; you won’t budge, even if you know budging might be the appropriate next step. Perhaps there are times in life when such solidness is called for. I propose that a more flexible approach is better suited to making progress in learning about meditation. Krishna’s advice on conquering the mind is to apply these two things: regular practice and detachment. His instructions about the practicalities may be vague but the directions for the mental approach are specific and point to an attitude of willingness and regularity. I take this to mean practice regularly and be flexible.

This Shouldn’t Be Happening to Me

One of the recurring stumbling blocks facing students of spirituality is that of feeling unworthy when challenges emerge along the way. It can pop up when a student feels ashamed because of a situation in which they discover themselves, one that does not match their idea of what a student of spirituality should be experiencing. Whether that is a block in practice, or a relationship that is dissolving emotionally, or they lose their job, they may become distracted or embarrassed because of what is happening.
They may have a fixed idea that because now that they are on a spiritual path, those sorts of things shouldn’t happen to them. Sometimes this leads the student to resist asking for help because they feel unworthy of support; they may even resist taking advantage of the available support systems, such as contacting friends, prayer partners if they have one, or mentors. It can be very difficult to reach a person who has gone down that path, because they may isolate or mask what is happening by behaving normally. They may be conflicted both by understanding that their self-critical thoughts are unwarranted, and at the same time by having contradictory thoughts such as “I’m a failure.” Such self-defeating ideas belong in the category of thoughts that go something like this: “If you are spiritual, you will never have poor health or any challenges of any kind, and if you do, there is something essentially, spiritually speaking, wrong with you.” Even though this idea doesn’t match reality, and even though everyone around a person in whom such an idea has become lodged will tell them it isn’t so, some continue to believe their private thoughts while nodding their head in agreement to what is being said.

Here is a more reasonable description of life, spiritual or otherwise, that I think is important to keep in mind right
from the beginning of setting up a meditation practice: Everybody makes mistakes as part of the process called living, and in that process are unexpected challenges, ups, downs, and in betweens. It is all part of the ordinary complex process of being alive, and no one is exempt from it. As the title of Jim Rosemergy’s book explains, Even Mystics Have Bills to Pay. If a person has a fixed idea about what spiritual living looks like, especially if it is an idealized version of perfection, then the ordinary twists and turns of life can be confusing to them, and they may even become embarrassed when they, as they most certainly will, find themselves in one of those moments. And so it is that they turn away from their practice, whether that is prayer or meditation, or they shrink from taking refuge in their spiritual community at the very times when those activities might be the most helpful. The way out and through is not to retreat, and neither is it to conquer through combat. The way out is characterized by generosity of spirit and kindness toward yourself.

Sitting in quietness without a fixed agenda is a way of encouraging ourselves to take in the imperfections of life with a little more gentleness, less embarrassment, shame, or self-criticism. Even if you notice that during your sitting practice you don’t seem to be able to adopt a positive frame
of mind, and worry continues to find its way into your thought, you may start to realize that you are going through something that everyone goes through. The fact is, sometimes worry is intensely present. With this generous approach, you may begin to develop an understanding of such things as appropriate fear, appropriate concern and/or grief without slipping into the kind of denial practice that turns away from, or sugarcoats, uncomfortable feelings and experiences. There is no amount of worrying you can do that will change reality. There is no amount of emphatic positive thinking you can do that will cover what you really think. Your inner life will change dramatically, however, when you let your thought land without force, authentically and gently, on an affirmative concept that it accepts without resistance. When that happens, it appears to affect the view of everything outside yourself.

When I began to practice meditation regularly, I discovered to my relief that I could have two opposing beliefs at the same time and it didn’t mean I was lacking in spirituality or that I needed to be repaired. Through gentle observing, I noticed I could have both faith and fear simultaneously, and it wasn’t my task to deny or affirm either one. Instead, I learned to gently uncover each thought that passed through my mind and watch it compassionately. That became my work, and that did wonders to ground me
in a peaceful, accepting frame of mind. Ultimately, that gentle work equipped me to face and navigate through some of the truly difficult challenges and disappointments in my life.

**Familiarity Breeds Contentment**

Once I learned how to compensate for not being able to *see* in my mind’s eye what I was being asked to imagine, I was able to experience guided meditation in a new way. I learned to listen to what was being told in the meditation instructions as if listening to a story being recited. It doesn’t matter whether or not I can visually see what a friend is telling me when recounting their recent experience with something, I just have to listen to the story and enjoy it. In a similar way, I learned when listening to a guided meditation that I could enjoy the directions as if they were the recitation of story told to me by a friend. Some of my friends whom I love dearly take too long to tell a story for my taste, but I love them so much that I cherish the storytelling anyway. I practice the same approach with following guided meditation: Why not enjoy it like a story? I could understand what was being said, and that turned out to be enough.

This change in perception about what using my
imagination could be like allowed me to open up to a suggestion, made by a teacher, to create an imagined inner space to which I could mentally return for quiet and meditative introspection. The childlike simplicity of the imaginative venture appealed to me immensely. I was to create a space inside my own mind accessible only to me through the story I told myself. I didn’t have to see the images of the place I was creating; I just had to describe it to myself as if in a conversation. I decided that an elevator down into the earth, with a complex security code entered on a numeric pad, would do the trick to create an atmosphere of security. The descent to the underground lair in my thoughts became an enjoyable mind-adventure. Surprisingly, I derived a lot of pleasure from visiting my inner world and found that the ritual of the mental journey to it produced a peaceful state of mind in which I could be single-minded, present, and peaceful.

Down in the earth, in the lair of my imagination, I had a place now where there was sanctuary, a place I would visit frequently to rest and regroup. Sometimes I imagined there was a kind of oracle there to consult with about a question on my mind, and other times I imagined having a phone conversation with someone I admire. Part of the success of this particular method is that I had to walk myself
through an elaborate system of entering the access code, descending in the elevator, and refreshing my description of what was waiting there. Later I began to see the connection between repeated actions and how they can set up a rhythm that contributes to a meditative state. The growing familiarity of the imagined inner place developed into a deep sense of contentment and ease. After a while I realized that I didn’t need to tell myself the story or imagine the space inside to enter the state of contentment; I had become so familiar with it that the practice could give way to simple, straightforward sitting in silence.

Familiarity can cause a sense of contentment and confidence, and perhaps, I’m learning, the serenity of contentment is necessary to open the doorway to what is not yet known. There could be some apprehension about opening unknown states of mind, and without the comfort of familiar practices and experiences one may shy away from going deeper. In a way, familiarity through repetition has provided me the comfort to become aware of things that I had not noticed before. This has been as true in meditation as it has been in other activities where I have repeated the same actions faithfully, such as in my twice-weekly run around the local lake. For years I have taken nearly the same path, with minor variations, around a scenic lake in
the neighborhood, and through the years I have started to know the area very well.

I know the location of fallen oak trees and the mosses that grow on them, the places where wildlife are likely to be encountered, and places where the path is more strenuous than others. These details of the journey have been integrated into the whole experience, and although I remain aware of them, I now have them catalogued and remembered so that they compete less and less for my attention. Instead, I find my available attention has been freed up to look at the places between locations of familiarity for what else might be there that I hadn’t noticed before. I find myself looking for spiderwebs reflecting the light, delighted at how many there are that I hadn’t seen before; or looking into the dark spots where my eyes hadn’t loitered before and noticing the textures and colors that had always been present but unnoticed. I experienced this as an awakening of awareness, and the result was a lusher experience of my time at the lake.

Some Of The Silence Stays With You

It may be easier to describe what the process of awakening to your inner life is not like than it is to describe what it is