

Priming the Wandering Mind for Mindfulness

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In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

We've all been there before. We want to focus on something, but our mind keeps racing. The thoughts keep gushing out like water from a broken fire hydrant and we just can't seem to turn them off. We feel helpless and frustrated. What do we do?

Some psychologists call this predicament the “wandering mind,” and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind¹. Our brain is like a cage and there is a wild animal inside it, bouncing around, and it feels like there is nothing we can do to calm him down. The good news is that we can do something about it if we know the right techniques.

We can control the wandering mind by applying mindfulness practices. Mindfulness is a relatively new field of psychology that studies how we can keep our minds aware and focused on the present moment instead of being governed by our own personal wild animal.

The first thing to note is that we are not our thoughts. This is a realization that psychologists and therapists call *cognitive defusion*.² We have little control over the thoughts that arise in our mind, such as the whispers of the ego and of Shaytan. This is why we are not sinful or held accountable for the passing thoughts and feelings we experience. We can, however, learn to control how we **react** to our thoughts. This is where mindfulness can help.

Mindfulness can be practiced in many ways, but perhaps the most popular form is meditation. In a basic mindfulness meditation session, we go somewhere quiet where we can be undisturbed for a few moments. We sit down or lay down, close our eyes, and just focus on how we feel in the present moment. ***What are we feeling, emotionally and physically?*** Just feel our breath enter and exit our lungs. When a thought comes up – as it surely will – we bring our focus back to what we are feeling. We don't fight or suppress the thought. We just bring ourselves back to our center of awareness and presence.

How does this help us control the way we react to our thoughts? According to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, our minds have two parts: an observing part and a thinking part. When we are observing the present moment – a feeling, a sensation – we're not thinking about anything else because our mind is taking in the sensation. In other

words, if our mind is focused on the now, it can't also be focused on sadness with the past or anxiety with the future.

When we're meditating, an ordinary thought will come up such as an assignment due tomorrow, a project to finish, worrying about what others think of us, etc. When that happens, we use an **anchor** to bring ourselves back to the present moment. An anchor is a word or phrase that helps us come back to the present. As Muslims, it can be one of our regular forms of worship such as prayer, *dhikr* (remembrance) of the 99 names of *Allah*, a *duaa* (supplication), or even saying *alhamdulillah* (all praise is due to God) for our own breath.

Every time we use our meditation-anchor to come back to the present moment, it is like our brain is doing a push-up or a bicep curl. Multiple studies using magnetic resonance imaging have shown that meditation can cause structural and functional modifications in the brain³. The more we train ourselves to meditate and refocus on the current moment, the easier it will be for us to redirect our thoughts in our daily life. Meditation teaches us to find that split-second between thought and reaction to create a little space of time that can help us control our response. The more we meditate, the bigger that space becomes and the easier it is to respond appropriately to mental stimuli.

Muslim scholars have talked about this phenomenon in their writings. Ibn Taymiyyah (*rahimahu Allah*, may Allah have mercy on him), for instance, likens mindfulness to dealing with an angry dog on a leash.⁴ We wouldn't start fighting the dog, would we? No, we'd appeal to the owner of the dog to rein him in. In the same way, when our thoughts start bothering us, we redirect our attention to *Allah* in the present. The dog is like our troublesome thoughts. Instead of fighting the dog and getting him all worked up, we turn to the owner (in this case, *Allah*) to give us relief.

Ibn al-Qayyim (*rahimahu Allah*) explains mindful thinking another way.⁵ Let us consider our thoughts as if they were people on the road of life. If we stop to talk to them, they'll talk back to us and keep us occupied. If we simply ignore them and go on our way, we'll leave them behind. The same thing is true about our thoughts. If we start talking to ourselves about our thoughts, like telling ourselves, "I'm so bad for thinking that!", the idea will linger in our mind. If we ignore the idea and move on, it may slink off into the background.

I think of it like this: our thoughts are like waves that come and go every day. We can't stop them from coming, but we can learn to let them go. If we start smacking the waves with our paddle, we'll just make more waves. If we patiently let them come and go without engaging them, they'll eventually move on. Of course, we can choose to engage them, and at times we should, but we should try do so on our own terms and not on those of the "wandering mind."

Let's commit to a regular meditation practice within an Islamic context. Just ten minutes at first, or however long we want to do it. I do something similar to what was described by Imam al-Ghazali (*rahimahu Allah*).⁶ I go into my room, turn off the lights, sit quietly,

close my eyes, and just focus on my breath, feeling grateful for the ease of breathing that *Allah* has given me. Just focusing on the blessing of my own breath is a great way to increase my gratitude to *Allah*. Then, when those ordinary thoughts show up as they naturally do, I use my anchor to bring me back: *Subhan Allahi wa bi hamdihi* (glory to *Allah* and His praises). As a result, my mind wanders off and I bring myself back to the present moment, remembering *Allah*.

If we commit to this practice once a day, we just might start enjoying the tranquility of a silent mind and its relief from stress. Within a few weeks or so, we'll get a lot better at noticing that small space between thought and reaction, helping us get ahold of the wandering mind by not letting it control us.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.

1. Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert, "A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind," *Science*, 12 Nov 2010: Vol. 330, Issue 6006, pp. 932.

2. J. T. Blackledge, *Cognitive Defusion in Practice: A Clinician's Guide to Assessing, Observing, & Supporting Change in Your Client* (Oakland, CA: Context Press, 2015).

3. "Meditation: In Depth," *National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health*. Accessed October 13, 2020. www.nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation-in-depth

4. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Asrār al-Ṣalāh* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2003), 76.

5. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Al-Jawāb al-Kāfi* (al-Maghrib: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1997), 1:157.

6. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1980), 3:19.

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