

0.1 Chapter 4: self: Calm

0.2 Calm

1 Philosophical Meditation

Even though our minds ostensibly belong to us, we don't always control or know what is in them. There are always some ideas, bang in the middle of consciousness, that are thoroughly and immediately clear to us: for example, that we love our children. Or that we have to be out of the house by 7.40am. Or, that we are keen to have something salty to eat right now. These thoughts feel obvious without burdening us with uncertainty or any requirement that we reflect harder on them.

But a host of other ideas tend to hover in a far more unfocused state. For example, we may know that our career needs to change, but it's hard to say much more. Or we feel some resentment against our partner over an upsetting incident the night before, but we can't pin down with any accuracy what we're in fact bitter or sad about. Our confusions sometimes have a positive character about them but are perplexing all the same: perhaps there was something deeply exciting about a canal-side cafe we discovered in Amsterdam or the sight of a person reading on a train or the way the sun lit up the sky in the evening after the storm, but it may be equally hard to put a finger on the meaning of these feelings.

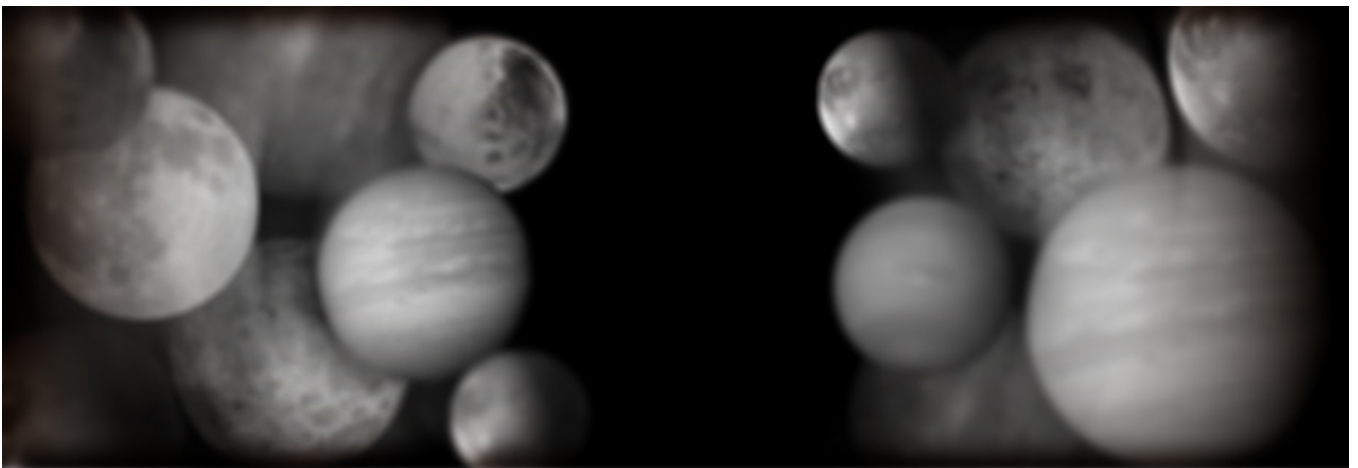


Unfocused thoughts are constantly orbiting our minds, but from where we are, from the observatory of our conscious selves (as it were), we can't grasp them distinctly. We speak of needing to sort our heads out or to get on top of things, but quite how one does something like this isn't obvious or very much discussed.

There is one response to dealing with our minds that has become immensely popular in the West in recent years. Drawn from the traditions of Buddhism, the practice of meditation has gripped the Western imagination, presenting itself as a solution to the problems of our chaotic minds. It is estimated that 1 in 10 adults in the US has taken part in some form of structured meditation.



Adherents of meditation suggest that we sit very quietly, in a particular bodily position, and strive, through a variety of exercises, to *empty* our minds of content, quite literally to push or draw away the disturbing and unfocused objects of consciousness to the periphery of our minds, leaving a central space empty and serene. In the Buddhist world-view, anxieties and excitements are not trying to tell us anything especially interesting or valuable. We continuously fret without good purpose, about this or that random and vain thing and therefore the best solution is simply to push the objects of the mind to one side.



1.0.0.0.1 Eastern Meditation: the mind being emptied of its confused content

Buddhist meditation has been so successful, we are liable to forget another effective and in some ways superior path to finding peace of mind, this one rooted in the Western tradition: Philosophical Meditation. Like its Eastern counterpart, Philosophical Meditation wants our thoughts, feelings and anxieties to trouble us less, but it seeks to sort out our minds in a very different manner. At heart, it doesn't believe that the contents of our minds are nonsensical or meaningless. Our worries may seem like a nuisance but they are in fact neurotically garbled but important signals about how we should direct our lives. They contain complex clues as to our development. Therefore, rather than wanting simply to *empty* our minds of content, practitioners of Philosophical Meditation encourage us to *clean* these minds up: they want to bring the content that troubles us more securely into focus, and thereby usher in calm through understanding rather than through evacuation.



1.0.0.0.2 Western Meditation: the minds confused objects being brought into focus

How does one bring the confused objects of the mind into focus? There are instructions for Philosophical Meditation, just as there are for Buddhist Meditation (a little artificiality in these matters may just be what we need to lend the process discipline). The first priority is to set aside a bit of time, ideally 20 minutes, once a day. One should sit with a pad of paper and start by asking oneself a very simple set of questions: what is it that I am *regretful*, *anxious* or *excited* about at present? One is invited to download the immediate contents of one's mind. One will by nature be a little unsure of what our feelings mean, so it is best simply to write down without thinking or censoring ourselves one or two words around each feeling. It's a case of tipping out the contents of the mind onto the paper as unselfconsciously as possible. One might, for example, write down: Darren, Cologne trip, weekend, shoes, Mum, face at train station... The task is then to try to convert each of these words from an ambiguous and silent worry, regret or thrill into something one can understand, grasp, order and eventually better control. Success in this meditation relies on a skilful process of questioning. Imagine these thoughts as ineloquent and muddled strangers, who are full of valuable ideas, but whom one has to get to know in a roundabout way, by directing just the right questions at them. [See the link at the end of this piece for a more complete Guide to Philosophical Meditation]

Philosophical Meditation brings us calm not by removing issues, so much as by helping us to understand them, thereby evaporating some of the paranoia and static that might otherwise cling to them. When confused objects of consciousness become clearer, they stop bothering us quite so much. Problems don't disappear, but they assume proportion and can be managed. For example, we may make ourselves at home with an array of administrative worries that had been clumsily concealed under the vague title of the Cologne trip. The word Darren might disclose someone we envy, but who holds out a fascinating run of clues as to how we might make a new move in our career. The word weekend yields feelings towards one's partner which are both resentful and yet capable of being discussed and perhaps worked through in the evening.

Sorting out our minds doesn't just feel comforting (like tidying our homes), it also spares us grave errors. Confused excitement can be highly dangerous when it involves career ambitions. Imagine someone with a tendency to experience excitement when reading *Vogue* or *Gourmet Traveller* and who then declares, without much attempt to analyse the feeling, that they want to work in magazines. It may seem reasonable enough for them to send off a CV to the magazine company HQ. After many efforts, they may be offered a lowly internship. It might take a few years and a lot of heartache before they realise that it wasn't really the magazines themselves that were the true object of their attraction to begin with. Actually what was really speaking to this person was the idea of working in a close-knit team in an area that wasn't finance (where Mum, a caustic and forbidding figure, puritanical in matters of sex and money, spent her career). Philosophical Meditation can, among other things, save us a lot of time.



1.0.0.0.3 Not thinking might land you up here

Similar dangers play out when one is upset or anxious. Imagine that yesterday, you had dinner at the house of a conspicuously successful friend. They'd just got back from a holiday in the Maldives and were telling you about their latest business venture in pharmaceuticals. You left feeling restless and annoyed, but you didn't know why. Your own life felt flat and dispiriting. Vague plans about what to do swirled around in your head. Maybe you could have a brilliant idea and start a business. Somehow you wanted your life to be more like your friends. But what is a brilliant idea in business? How does one get going? Then your partner said something about having set up a dinner with her mother. At that moment, from somewhere mysterious in you, you felt a wave of anger and shouted something about the house always being left in such a mess. After all, there was a set of dirty plates in your field of vision. But your partner said you were crazy, the house wasn't that messy anyway, and how long would it take to tidy away a few plates in the first place...? She walked out of the room crossly and so tonight, you'll be sleeping on the sofa again for a whole set of reasons that it's now becoming very hard to disentangle, let alone discuss with any degree of maturity.

Countless agonies and mistakes stem from not properly analysing our confused inner experiences. We

pick the wrong job; get together with the wrong person, run away from the right person; spend our money on the wrong things and don't do justice to our talents and deeper aspirations. Acting without Philosophical Meditation is like being allowed to embark on a trip without checking the equipment or the map. We trust the feelings without duly acknowledging that they may prompt us in some catastrophic directions.



The longing to *empty* the mind, to calm turbulent thoughts isn't completely opposed to the exercise of *cleaning up* the mind, decoding, analysing and ordering its contents. It's just that at the moment, as societies, we have allowed ourselves to get overly seduced by the promise of tranquility, so that we always strive to empty the mind, instead of attempting to understand its contents. We see our agitation as the result of thinking too much, rather than of not having as yet thought enough. It's time for our societies to take on board the promises and advantages of Philosophical Meditation.

An Introduction to Philosophical Meditation



1. Once a day, clear a 20 minute stretch of time. Sit comfortably with pen and paper. Ask yourself three initial questions:

- i. what am I currently upset about?
- ii. what am I currently anxious about?
- iii. what am I currently curious or excited about?

You're likely to be able to jot down a few things under each of these categories, but keep the answer deliberately unprocessed, just a word or so, as vague as it is likely to be in its raw form. Your list will be incomprehensible to anyone else. It might read: biscuits, Chinese woman, 10.30, TBOL, food or Mother, invoice, Seoul, Luke, trees in wind.

2. You're likely to have between two to three words under each of the three categories: Upset, Anxiety, Excitement (the mind can't properly hold too much at any one time, even in its darker reaches).

3. Drill systematically into each category (Upset, Anxiety, Excitement) using the questions below.

Direct the following questions/directions at each of your words in turn:

There's no need to answer all the questions. They won't all be relevant. They are prompts and might prompt other questions in you.

QUESTIONS FOR UPSET:

By upset, one means: minor and major hurts from people or situations. An unkind word, a slight, a feeling of envy, a sense of abandonment... The theory is that we often don't allow ourselves to analyse

our hurts from a misplaced sense of stoicism and bravery. We pay for this dearly, for undigested hurts generate bitterness, confusion and misdirected aggression.

- Retell yourself the upsetting incident in great detail as if you were telling it to an extremely kind and patient friend.
- What scared you about the incident?
 - Youve been hurt. Its normal to be hurt. How have you been hurt?
- What good part of yourself feels in danger?
- How might a nice person have ended up doing what this person did to you? If they werent actively mean, what other explanations could there be for the hurt they have caused?
- If this were to carry on, what might be the catastrophe?
- What are you afraid might happen if this were to continue?
- Have you been affected like this before?
- If you had to pin down an incident in the past that this somehow reminds you of, what would it be? Is there a pattern here?
- If this had happened to a friend, how would you advise them?
- What might you be able to learn from this upset?

QUESTIONS FOR ANXIETY:

Anxiety is a garbled signal about what a part of us perceives as a danger. It both asks for worry while not clearly revealing the roots of its concerns.

- Tell the story of the coming anxious period in great detail and say exactly what you imagine might go wrong?
- What would happen to you if it all went wrong?
- If this thing were to keep getting worse, then ...
- The danger here is that...
- How might you still be OK, even if it was all absolutely terrible?
- How would the person youd like to be ideally deal with this situation?
- What previous situation does this remind you of? Have you been in something like this before?
- What happened in the past?
- What helped in the past

QUESTIONS FOR EXCITEMENT:

By excitement is meant a range of positive emotions, tremors of interest, pleasing nostalgia, tentative enthusiasm, visual delight and so on.

- Describe your excitement as if to a sympathetic, interested friend.
- You need to change your life in certain ways: what would it be to change your life in the light of this?
- What are the good things contained here?
- Humans have an impulse towards growth: what call to growth is here in a garbled form?
- This exciting thing holds a clue to what is missing in my life; what might be missing?
- When else have you felt something similar?
- If this thing could talk, what might it tell me?
- If this thing could try to change my life, what changes might it advise?
- If other parts of my life were more like this, what might they be like?

Answering these questions cant necessarily remove troubles but they start the work of decoding the scrambled messages. They reduce anxiety (rather than guarantee utter tranquility); they increase clarity rather than promise instant enlightenment.

