

```
+++ date = '2025-04-10T22:23:23-04:00' draft = false type = "draft" title = "don't clear your mind" tags = ["meditation", "dhamma", "practice"] +++
```

The phrase "clear your mind," as applying to meditation, or other forms of spiritual practice, seems to have percolated thoroughly through our collective consciousness. For the purposes of this post, I'm largely interpreting this phrase as "don't have thoughts right now, stop any thoughts." I think this phrase being pervasive is largely a negative thing. My reasons for this are twofold:

- 1. It's *really* hard. Or rather, it takes a lot of work to get there. Unless you've been practicing diligently for a long time (read, an hour a day for years, ish). It's unlikely you have the necessary skills and faculties built up to even be able to have no thoughts for an extended period of time.
- 2. It's not really that good of a goal?
 - 2.1 This one has a caveat that I'll get into later. If you're experienced with meditation and you disagree, you'll probably find what you're thinking further down.

1. It's hard

Lets start with 1. The problem with this isn't that trying to do something hard is a bad thing, far from it! But if you tell the average person "stop having thoughts now!" the most likely outcome, by far, is that they'll continue having thoughts, but be a bit – or a lot! – upset about that fact because they can't make them stop.

One of the things you learn through meditation is how bad it can feel to do something in a way that fundamentally *doesn't* work. The main problem I have with this phrase is effectively a fear: that new meditators will start up, have thoughts while trying not to have them, and drop it. This fear is thankfully mitigated by the presence of a rather large amount of good meditation advice, guided meditation, books, retreats, and teachers.

I have, however, met a lot of people who say something along the lines of "oh I can't meditate, I have too many thoughts" or "oh I can't meditate, I can't sit still." With the underlying assumptions being "meditation is about not thinking," or "meditation is about stillness." Neither of these is wholly false, but they're both mostly false, at least at the level they're referring to. This brings me to the second point.

2. Having no thoughts is not a great goal

In his book, *Sanity and Sainthood*, Tucker Peck uses the metaphor that we (everyone) is living next to a smelly, polluted pond. This is the pond of all your conditioning, all of your trauma, all of the things that are – kindly – messed up about you (hey, it's everyone, I promise). We have a bucket, with which we could empty the pond, bucketful by bucketful. Buckets really don't have that much volume compared to a pond (surprising, I know. I'm blowing your mind rn, aren't I?). So we have two options: (A) we can try to empty this pond bucketful by bucketful, or (B) we can try to get used to living next to this pond.

In his book, he likens (A) to doing psychological work, and (B) to doing spiritual practice that tends towards equanimity. Meditation is the (B). When we're sitting^[^1] in meditation, we're training a number of skills, but one of the most important ones is the training of equanimity. Equanimity is a somewhat hard to define quality, but the way I tend to think of it is as "to be equanimous is to not fight reality." This doesn't mean

that you don't take necessary steps to keep yourself and others healthy – if you get a serious cut you should put a band-aid on it, not sit in meditation.

The training of this quality is *vastly* more important than the ability to have no thoughts. Instead, when you're caught up in thoughts, eventually you'll notice that fact. At that point, you can kindly thank the part of your mind that noticed you were distracted from the task you set yourself, and gently return to the meditation. Sometimes it will be the case that despite bringing as much kindness and gentleness to meditation as you can, you'll still get frustrated, annoyed, or discouraged. Training equanimity means we treat this the same as being distracted – notice the frustration, and gently return the attention to the meditation. Don't fight the reality that you're experiencing a negative emotion.

In fact, anything that arises in meditation that you're viewing as "the problem" is just another thing to apply this to, don't fight reality. Be kind, be gentle, notice what's occurring, return to your meditation object. Seek out a teacher if things aren't changing over the course of several months.

2.1 The Caveat

It is the case that having no thoughts might eventually be a goal of an *very experienced* meditator. Once the mind gets relaxed and collected^[^2], it's possible that thoughts will cease (or at least fade so far into the background as to seem not to exist, I'm not sure if we know which is the case). This can be helpful for further deepening the meditation and seeing experience with sharp clarity. But this quality of thoughts disappearing is essentially a side effect rather than something to specifically cultivate.

Regardless, I do not feel qualified to comment heavily on the deeper stages of practice, and if you think you're approaching those and don't already have a teacher, *please* search for one.

[^1]: I say sitting here but meditation can be done in any posture [^2]: I'm using "collected" here rather than "concentrated" because it's common for people to view concentration as a process in which you're trying really hard to do something and blocking everything else out. The quality we're actually talking about here is the translation of the Pali/Sanskrit word "Samadhi." It points to a relaxed kind of collectedness, akin to a flow state (in fact I believe it's been posited that samadhi and other deep states and flow are the same process in different contexts, but don't quote me on that)