

## ***Recognizing Your “Monkey Mind” and Loving Yourself Anyway*** By Ryan Harrison

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Have you ever had a friend or loved one ask you, “Where did *that* come from?” when you said something totally unconnected to the current topic of conversation? After an embarrassed smile, you probably gave an interesting explanation that described a complex connection between a chain of thoughts that passed at lightning speed, bridging gaps between seemingly unrelated topics in a way that is both fascinating and quizzical.

Or, have you ever tried to sit quietly without entertaining any thoughts or feelings only to find that your mind kept filling up all the same, and your heart with unbidden emotions? No matter how hard you tried – and trying probably made it worse – you just couldn’t be mentally still?

Welcome to your “monkey mind.”

In contemplative practices, the monkey mind can also be called the “discursive mind,” describing that perpetual conversation going on in your head. Your thoughts jump around seemingly out of control and the more energy you spend trying to rein yourself in, the more intense those monkeys can seem. The truly tricky thing about this internal dialogue is that it runs constantly like subconscious programming, and most of us aren’t even aware of it. The monkey mind is so much a part of our everyday existence that, like breathing, it just happens over and over again. And it wouldn’t be a problem if it didn’t also routinely shape our responses to life. Rather than *creating* a response based on what would be the wisest course of action, the monkey mind *reacts*, often only adding further to problems, misunderstandings and personal stress.

To help move from reaction to creation, contemplative practices such as meditation work at training the mind. Some kinds of meditation practice, for example, consist only of sitting and calmly noticing each and every thought that crosses the mind...and then letting each of them go.

By letting thoughts come and go gently, you learn to recognize the energy and motion of the monkey mind. This, in turn, gives you a subtle kind of power over it; you can choose either to follow it on its wild ride, or allow it to pass so you can approach a situation calmly and from a much more centered space.

Developing this mastery over the monkey mind takes time, practice, and a great deal of compassion toward yourself. Called “maitri” (pronounced “MY-tree”) in Buddhist philosophy, this self-aimed compassion gives you permission to love yourself no matter how crazy your mind is, no matter how hard it is to rein it in, and no matter how long it takes you to do so. Developing maitri is so important in the training of the mind, in fact, that it is often the principal focus for those beginning a regular practice of meditation.

You can work on recognizing your monkey mind by noticing when you instantly react to something or someone. Having this kind of awareness this is great – it is the first step in not giving control of your life to your unconscious programming. The next step is to love yourself anyway, monkey mind, snap reactions, and all. Often a harder step than the first, it is also more rewarding. Well-developed maitri inevitably expresses itself in positive ways, strengthening your self-esteem and your relationship with the world around you.