

Fortunately, the mystics experimented with various ways to do this and have left us with some very useful practices.

1. The Mantra

The basic idea here is to preempt the potential for automatic thought by mentally repeating a word or phrase, usually something sacred, over and over again. If you do this often enough and long enough it can actually even become automatic itself.

2. Mindfulness or Awareness

The idea here is to proactively give your mind something to think about. It works in the same way really as the mantra practice. By being mindful of your breath or the sensations in your body, by putting your attention there, you can supplant and foreclose the potential for automatic thought.

3. Concentration

You can also turn off your mind simply by concentrating really hard on what you are doing. This is what happens when kids play or when you get absorbed in your work. You become so fully engaged in what you are doing there is just no space for automatic thought.

4. No Mind, the Don't-Know Mind, the Actively Passive Mindset

The final and most difficult category has been described in different ways by the Buddhists, in particular of the Zen tradition, but also by psychologists in the modern era. The idea is to learn how to prevent the mind from thinking at all.

Ove the past 5 or 6 years as I've been experimenting with these methods I have found that there is value in each, and rather than pick just one, it's more effective to use all four,

rotating through each as the situations of the day evolve.

The mantra is really effective at bringing your mind back under control whenever you catch it wandering. It's also very useful whenever you are doing household chores or waiting in line somewhere—anything that doesn't demand or warrant a lot of attention or brain power. I've also found it to be really helpful in keeping your mind from wandering during conversation. There's also a lot of value in the process of choosing your mantra itself. It makes you really think carefully about what it is that you value.

Mindfulness is an amazing mental practice. Much of Buddhism is about how you can structure your entire life around mindfulness practices. I've found it to be really useful when you are with your loved ones or taking a break from your work, enjoying nature or eating and drinking. It helps slow things down and bring your attention to the fullness of the moment.

Concentration is incredibly effective but it tends to use up a lot of energy so you cannot do it for long periods of the day.

The actively passive or don't-know mind is the most difficult of these practices. While it's pretty easy to turn the chattering mind off simply by sort of talking to yourself—that is, saying “No more thinking, mind!” Or something like that—I've found it to be very difficult to keep this state of mind for longer than a few seconds.

I've found that the automatic process of the mind makes for a most formidable opponent. But the prize—the clear mind—is worth the effort. Even if just for seconds at a time, a small number of clear moments in a day can make all the difference. □