

BBMI Monday Meditations with Dr. Winston McCullough
Part 3: “Mind”

Continuing in week 3 with our BBMI (Body → Breath → Mind → Intention) meditation practice, today we’ll take a special focus on the “Mind” element of our practice. This one is a little more involved to explain, so let’s jump in...

After some yoga stretching and taking a nice seated posture (Body), and using our Breath to focus our attention and calm our physiological state, we move into what might be the main event, the Mind/Mental exploration. I will attempt to explain this third part in a very ecumenical and inclusive ways, honoring both our Christian contemplative traditions and paths from other enduring world religions, in the spirit of Perennial Philosophy, and with a good dose of psychology in the mix.

In some of the ancient yoga philosophy systems, a human being is understood as made up of five increasingly subtle layers or “sheathes”. Here’s one system:

1. **Our physical Body**, outer and internal -- arms, legs, etc.; and heart, lungs, cells, etc. This is BBMI part 1.
2. **Our Breath** as a main example of the stuff that nourishes our physical body (BBMI part 2).
3. **Our life force** (“prana” in Sanskrit) – which is impacted by and in turn impacts both our physical body/breath and our thoughts/emotions (which comes next). We discussed this one last week. Prana is the mechanism that connects our body/breath with our mind in the yoga traditions.
4. **Our Mind** – thoughts and emotions (BBMI part 3, which also includes...)
5. **Our deepest self**, the subtlest/deepest part of ourselves – understood in different ways and expressed with different language in different traditions: generally our spirit or soul in Western traditions (if you like, Christ Consciousness, “the kingdom of heaven within”, Holy Spirit, immanent presence, born of the spirit, etc.); our being an expression of God (e.g., Atman is Brahman) in Hinduism; our emptiness of inherent existence, or Buddha nature; purusha, samadhi, etc. in yoga traditions; and so on.

From this perspective, our BBMI meditation session moves in sequence from a focus on the less subtle parts to the more subtle: from Body to Breath (and via prana) to Mind. So here we are.

Practicing mindfulness (i.e., noticing our present-moment sensations, thought patterns etc. non-judgmentally), practicing loving-kindness prayers/wishes (which we’ll get into next week), and other mental practices are all primary ways to focus in the Mind step of a BBMI meditation session.

But this time around, we’re going to explore a state we can call generically **Inner Stillness** or **Inner Silence**. It has a profound connection with theological/philosophical/psychological understandings that are too much to get into right now (maybe later?). So today we’ll explore just the immediate experience without over-interpreting it’s meaning.

Inner Silence is a state that takes some consistent daily practice to cultivate. I think this connects with Pastor Matt’s April 26 message about re-wiring our minds/neuroplasticity and the fact that “I am not my

story” (there’s a lot more to me than the narrative I’m telling myself at this moment). Cultivating Inner Silence can be particularly helpful during stressful times, as a safe place of refuge to return to when our anxieties arise. It has clear neurological correlates that have been demonstrated in research with meditators from Western and Eastern traditions. It can also be experienced as profoundly spiritual, mystical, ecstatic (beyond the ego), transcendent – as transformative in our life journey, and perhaps beyond.

Okay, so how to practice and cultivate Inner Stillness? There are multiple ways, and again “different strokes for different folks” applies here.

1. **Follow sound into silence.** Imagine we’re all sitting together in a quiet place and someone rings a bell. We listen together as the sound gradually drifts into silence and we rest in that space of silence. This is both a practice and a metaphor to suggest the state that is beyond our five physical sense perceptions, beyond discursive thinking (either logical or wandering thought sequences), and beyond other distractions.
2. **Follow a mantra or prayer into silence.** Uttering a repeated simple word or phrase in an increasingly subtle way (spoken out loud, then softer and softer → then spoken silently, increasingly subtle → until we finally rest in silence/stillness). The word/phrase can have an explicit meaning or not, but we are not using our intellect to “think” about the meaning; we’re just allowing the words to carry us intuitively to a subtler state. One mantra that I particularly like:
“Be ... Still ... Know ... I Am ... God” (or just “Be” or just “Still”, etc.)
3. **Mindfulness.** Going deeply into mindfulness meditation practice, particularly the aspect of repeatedly letting go of self/other/situation-judgments, and watching our present-moment experience unfold without elaborations, can intuitively lead to inner silence.
4. **Investigating the *Gakja*.** This approach has been hugely helpful over the past 25 years in my personal practice. It’s founded on some elaborate Buddhist philosophy/psychology principles. Essentially, it’s getting to the very nature of how things exist after we peel away our subjective mental labels for things, including how we label ourselves and our own mind. Whoa, yeah, lots to that. For starters, in a deepish state of meditation, you can pose some questions to yourself: who are you when you strip away your roles (husband, father, employee, jazz musician, etc.) and the labels you place on yourself (curious, impatient, loving, selfish, etc.)? Those personal roles and qualities are all “adventitious” (i.e., they aren’t who we are inherently, even though they may seem so; I would still exist even without them). Who are we underneath all of that? And who is it who possesses those parts of ourselves. Who is the “I” who has this body, these emotions, etc.? “Gakja” is a Tibetan word that means “the thing I normally always assume is there, but it actually isn’t really there”. It’s the “jerk-ness” inherent in the person at work who most irritates me. It’s the biased negative self-criticism I sometimes believe about my self-worth. It’s the “hopelessness” of a challenging situation. Those are just three ideas, three mental constructs. Of course, there *are* jerks and challenging situations in the world, but what we’re reacting to directly is our personal impressions. What we experience is subjective, heavily

determined by our habits of what we pay attention to and how we interpret it. Get it? At some stage in this form of meditation an important realization occurs: the thing I've been reacting against that causes me suffering is actually an idea in my head that disappears when I modify it or focus elsewhere. And a huge cavity or absence is experienced, a spacious silent opening – possibility – from which hope can then spring. During the Mind part of this meditation, we just rest in that conclusion, in that state of inner silence/stillness, for as long as it is available. When our chatty discursive mind, or a pain in our ankle, arises, we move onto part 4: Intention (next week's topic).

5. **Simply Resting in Inner Silence.** Our 17-year-old son Fontaine can do a handstand for a minute or two without trying that hard. He's been practicing it ... a lot, every day, for many weeks, because it's a goal that he embraces. It was impossible at first, then gradually became easier as his body adjusted to the habit. Meditation is similar. What's completely inaccessible at first, becomes accessible, and eventually fairly effortless ... if we're willing to cultivate a daily practice to re-wire our mind and neurobiology. From one perspective, we can view meditation, including a state of Inner Silence, as a physiological embodied state, and researchers are learning about neuro-biological correlates to meditative states. With daily practice we can train our body-mind to cultivate a state of Inner Silence that becomes a close friend, readily available when we wish to open up to a subtler spiritual state, or need a place of refuge when life gets rocky. It's a state where we're more open to experience the presence of God in us, in others, and in the world around us, even as we face challenges. So sometimes in the third part of our BBMI meditation, we can simply choose to access that state of Inner Silence, Inner Stillness. On other days we're more distracted by less subtle concerns, and that's okay. But sometimes...

All of the above is one take on the Mind segment of a BBMI meditation. There's plenty more to say, but thanks for reading and listening. I hope there's something there to explore to bring meaning, joy and relief during this unusual time ... and beyond. Best Wishes.