

Mind

We believe that we exist inside our heads. But there's a problem:

We assume that our perception of ourselves, others, and the world at large, is accurate. We walk around in a default operating mode that does not question our perceptions. This is understandable. Our survival might once have depended on making quick decisions based on models generated through experience. It would not be helpful to question the existence of a wild beast about to launch an attack.

In fact, the mind is obsessed with keeping us safe, which is another way of saying it's more invested in maintaining the illusion of security and control, than in freedom.

Our mind's unquestioned assumptions, simplified models, and constant internal narrative, while helpful in some ways, also trap us in ways we don't generally notice.

What we do notice are the consequences: for example, we might have a feeling that our minds are overwhelming, or out of control, or that we constantly return to certain thoughts that hold us back, no matter how much we want to get rid of them.

Neuroscience is still far from explaining how our brains work. Fortunately, we don't need a full understanding of the brain to free ourselves from the tyranny of the mind. We just need to notice and pay attention to a few programs that our minds execute.





First, we construct models of ourselves.

We believe ourselves to be continuous beings, when in reality, our personality is an illusion generated by the fact that we have memories. If we were to wake up every morning with all our memories of the previous day erased, we'd have no idea who we were. We constantly adapt to new stimuli and information. So we are constantly changing, but without consciously acknowledging these changes, because we believe that we are a singular being with clear boundaries and a solid core. We underestimate how much we are influenced, and overestimate how much free will we are really exercising.

Second, we construct models of other people.

We expect people to act predictably, according to the model we have created of them. When they do not (which is inevitable, because like us, they change and evolve every day), this can cause all kinds of unnecessary resentment and conflict. We become stuck in unhelpful emotions that have nothing to do with reality (see Emotions). As a result, we may make decisions and behave towards others in ways that do not serve our best interests.

Third, we construct models of how the world works.

We accept the existence of systems called politics, the economy, society. We form our own ideas about how we fit into them, what they should do for us, and whether they are good or bad things. All of these perspectives are subjective. People hold very different and sometimes directly opposing ideas about the nature of our shared reality, which logically cannot all be true at the same time. Endless debates over whose personal mind-model is correct can stand in the way of taking the useful, practical actions that improve our lives.

Fourth, we construct beliefs.

These can be beliefs that we learned from family, society, education, or they can be beliefs that we created. We generate our identity out of beliefs about ourselves that are at times self-critical and limiting. We also absorb beliefs passively, so we have 'unknown unknown' beliefs,



which influence us without our awareness. These can be especially harmful to our inner freedom. All of our beliefs, regardless of origin, interact and interbreed, creating mental structures that can sabotage us in unintended ways.

Fifth, we construct narratives.

Narratives are a feature of all the mind models. Our minds are very good at producing stories – and not very good at undoing or questioning them. We’re often building a story as we go about our day, making judgments about ourselves, other people, and situations, without asking ourselves whether they are accurate or not. We create stories about our past and our future, which are not very useful because both memories and predictions are extremely unreliable; at worst, these stories can burden us with anguish and rumination over situations that either no longer exist, or might never exist.

Now, what can we do about it?



Self-Awareness: Mind

Becoming aware of the ways we are not free

To be aware of the mind is to take the role of an observer. We make it our goal to observe the activity of our minds closely and carefully, from the point of view of our True Self - the conscious awareness that is always present. We practice the art of simply noticing. We notice when we are falling into habitual patterns, such as always having the same arguments with the same people. We notice the narratives that we tell ourselves about the past and the future. We become the masters of our inner monologue instead of being guided by motivations that do not serve us, or others.



Ask...

What is my mind doing right now?

What story am I telling myself?

What judgments am I making?

Is this belief true?

Is it relevant and helpful to
what I need to do right now?

Who is thinking?



Ultimate freedom from the mind comes with the recognition that none of the content of the mind is who we really are. This can be very easy to achieve, or very difficult, depending on our level of attachment to the idea that we have a real identity. It can be as easy as flipping a switch (see “Identity”). But if it isn’t, there are steps that we can take in that direction.

🌀 Meditating.

Meditation truly is one of the best ways to observe the mind and gain distance from it (see Consciousness). Many of us feel intimidated by meditation practices. This is the ego’s way of avoiding facing the truth about ourselves - that we don’t actually exist. The ego is invested in perpetuating itself. Sitting quietly, alone with our thoughts, we would have to confront the many aspects of ourselves that are out of alignment. This might cause us to suffer, and is a deeply uncomfortable prospect. But if we know why our minds resist meditating, we can easily overcome it by taking one tiny step past the barrier of resistance. Starting small, by setting a timer for just 5 or 10 minutes, is the best way.

🌀 Asking ourselves questions about what we think.

For example, “Is this belief I have actually true?” False beliefs often contain generalizations that logically cannot be true (always, never), negatives (can’t, don’t, won’t), or prescriptives (should, must). If the answer to our question is “no, the belief is false”, we have the power to challenge and change it. An easy way to do this is to replace a limiting belief with a simple positive belief that the mind can effortlessly accept and integrate. For example: replace “I always make mistakes” with “I am constantly learning new ways to succeed”, or “I am being shown the path to success”.

🌀 Using self-talk.

Another easy way to reinforce positive and accurate beliefs is to repeat them regularly, silently or out loud. The things we say when we talk to ourselves really matter. We are programming our attitudes and behaviors.

🌀 Asking other people questions about what they think.

To understand them better, instead of relying on our mental model of them. It’s especially important to ask questions when we notice ourselves making judgments about what someone is saying, like “That’s stupid, he’s just an idiot”. Compassionate curiosity is the most effective



way to engage with someone we disagree with, and asking questions is the only way to get people to change their perspective (if that's our goal).

🌀 Noticing and disrupting habitual patterns of behavior.

For example, by trying things that challenge us or make us move in the direction of fears that we want to overcome.

🌀 Carefully choosing what we put inside our heads.

For more on this, see the chapter on Attention.

🌀 Learning to listen to our inner voice or intuition.

...instead of our mind chatter (see Awakening).

🌀 Releasing the past.

Our minds constantly bring elements of the past back into our conscious awareness. This is unhelpful if they are things we're beating ourselves up about. It's equally unhelpful if we're recalling positive experiences that we keep wanting to relive and hang onto. Both reduce our power in the present moment. We can safely free ourselves from the past by accepting that it cannot be changed, and switching our attention away from such thoughts as soon as they arise.

🌀 Releasing the future.

Our mind's projections about the future are limiting, and reinforce our fears and worries. Being worried about things that haven't happened yet makes no sense. The only thing it truly changes about the future is the likelihood that we will develop a disease, since anxiety and stress damage our health. Of course, we need to make practical plans, and have positive goals and dreams. But we also have to become comfortable with our lack of control and the impermanence of all things. Surrendering to the unknown is liberating.