



The meditation experiment

Gibster

Dedicated with love and deep gratitude to Jun Po Denis Kelly Roshi †

Revision 2 - 24th of August 2024

Preface

Meditation is a beautiful practice and once integrated into daily life essential for personal growth. Meditation can bring on many positive mental and physical changes, true understanding of yourself and even self-realization. But it can be very challenging, and many beginners often feel discouraged. While some may have profound peak experiences that motivate them to continue, many feel they do not see results quickly enough and lose interest. I'm a strong advocate of meditation, but also recognize that many people may need a more accessible and direct approach to achieving self-realization. This book uses a different methodology towards beginning meditation. First, we delve into the basics of what's happening in your brain regarding what we call the 'ego.' It's important to understand what the ego is and why it behaves this way – even appreciate its esoteric and complex inner workings. Then, we explore why it makes perfect sense that you believe in this ego and identify with it. Once we grasp the fundamental workings of the egoic system and why you feel you are the ego, we will begin deconstructing it with *the 9-day meditation challenge*; a progressive non-dualistic practice spread across nine days, each day introducing a practical, unconventional and accessible meditation form designed to explore consciousness from a different angle. Instead of focusing on the content of thoughts, we will examine the nature of thought itself, aiming to uncover the ego's actions and reveal the deeper layers of consciousness.

This book is set up in such a way that If you're the adventurous type and want to start with the meditation challenge right away then you can do that! (and if things are unclear along the way you can always go back to the starting chapters). If you want to understand the basics first then just keep on reading.

Consciousness

Before we can focus on meditation, we must first understand the ego, and before we can understand the ego, we must understand the concepts of consciousness, awareness and attention. Many of these terms are used interchangeably in various contexts, so let's clarify them for the scope of this book.

We intuitively feel that we are more than just our physical body, that there's something within us that is different - something non-physical and separate. You may call it the soul, psyche, or spirit. Consciousness is in that realm – it is the open space where sensations, thoughts and feelings arise. It's the fabric of your experiences. On the experiential level it is continuous, boundless (or groundless) and centerless. There are many metaphors for consciousness; from the vast ocean (the waves are your thoughts and feelings, while underwater all is still) or the blue sky with ever changing cloud formations (also thoughts and feelings) - a mirror that has reflections but has no actual objects in it - emptiness or nothingness.

On the level of the brain, its neurons being fired – we don't precisely know how this neural activity creates (or interfaces with) consciousness (or even where it is located in your brain). We do know this; you cannot predict what your next thought will be, or when it will enter or leave consciousness – it is magical in that sense. There is a whole metaphysical discussion to be had about how/what/why on the topic of consciousness which we will skip.

Awareness

Awareness is a subset of consciousness; it has an attribute that we call attention which is the metaphorical beam of light that can move and resize within consciousness. Awareness can focus (concentrate) while consciousness cannot. Consciousness is continuous and overarching while awareness is the immediate (and often automatic) perception of stimuli and thoughts. For most people awareness is intermixed with ego - which lowers the resolution of perceptions (we'll get to this later). What we call pure awareness is the capacity to perceive things in full resolution, so prior to knowing or recognition – before ego involvement. Finally, mindfulness is the ability to notice awareness in action (in essence pure awareness paying attention to 'impure' awareness). Attention is defined as awareness plus an object, where objects are: sensory input (sensations), thoughts and feelings.

When you accidentally stub your toe, your attention will immediately center at the location of the pain to see if the problem needs fixing. Awareness can swiftly and automatically focus on a particular object requiring attention, thereby shifting it to the foreground. In doing so, it reduces the awareness of other senses, thoughts, and feelings and thus moving them to the background. That's why jumping in an ice-cold bath or deep breathing gets you out of your head, and why getting caught up in a movie makes you forget your current troubles.

As with the toe stubbing, the same happens with thoughts. Perhaps you have experienced this: following a distressing life event, such as a recent breakup, you wake up in the morning feeling completely fine and serene. Suddenly, you recall the breakup and get thoughts of what your now ex-partner might be up to. Instantly, your awareness shifts to some image, bringing with it all the associated emotions and new (but related) thoughts; leaving you feeling quite the opposite of serene! The brain cannot differentiate between physical and mental pain and will now start working on 'fixing the problem of the breakup' (which it can't). Similarly, when someone says something nasty to you, your awareness will sharply focus on it - you might even recall instances where you distinctly noticed how 'narrow' that focus felt. Once awareness has shifted the higher-level emoting systems take over; anxiety or stress responses (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) will start.

When you are at ease the default mode network¹ (DMN) will take over. The DMN is your autopilot. When driving to the supermarket you may not remember much of the scenery; that's because your awareness was diffuse and not focused on anything specific. The DMN generally generates thoughts about your current context; so, for the breakup example the content of your thoughts will mostly be about that.

¹ Also referred to as the medial frontoparietal network in neuroscience

The ego

'The ego is an illusion' is a somewhat infamous phrase that originated from Buddhism and might make you think that the ego isn't real. While there is truth to that statement (which we'll explore in a bit), it's not particularly helpful when you're just starting out with meditation – because you feel the ego is you, and **you** are certainly not an illusion! So, for now, set aside the idea of the ego as an illusion and consider this: the voice in your head, filled with narration, images, stories, and associated feelings, is what we call the ego. It acts as a scriptwriter, director, and narrator, drawing its inspiration (mainly) from the hidden archives of your subconscious mind² intermixed with sensory data from your body. This 'person' in your head believes their work is essential for your safety and survival, and so it takes its job very seriously! Another way to view the ego is as a brain function that uses internal dialogue and visuals to ensure your survival. It's a natural and necessary part of you and useful in many personal and social contexts. The ego is autonomous; it keeps generating thoughts and feelings which you cannot (and should not) stop. At its core, the ego is driven by fear; from a survival perspective, this makes sense – taking a more cautious approach, assuming things could go wrong rather than taking risks is the smart way to survive. This is also why your thoughts tend to be more negative than positive as they originate from a core of existential fear.

The end goal of meditation is self-realization, which is to understand that there are only experiences in consciousness. More precisely, that there is only consciousness – that you are consciousness – simply because there really is nothing else! All things that arise in consciousness are not personal – they are not about you – they are just objects arising. Your ego makes stories about these objects and therefore they feel as if they are yours – that is what we call ego identification – and from the ego's point of view this totally makes sense – but we will later learn that this just results in stress and unnecessary suffering for you, and in turn for others.

The paradox of consciousness is that the ego cannot grasp it; hence you cannot enter it through *understanding* it. The ego itself is a closed object inside of your consciousness – it is the proverbial fish in the water – that doesn't know it's in the water nor that water even exists. The infinite cannot be known by the finite, or how Zen puts it; only awareness can shine on awareness. Let's break this down a bit: remember how attention is the combination of awareness and an object? Consciousness, however, isn't an object; it's the space in which objects appear. Because of this, your mind can't grasp consciousness directly or focus on it. If you try to put your attention on consciousness, your mind will search for an object, and when it doesn't find one, it might create a 'void' object, which is just another object -

² The subconscious mind is the part that operates below the level of conscious awareness, storing memories, beliefs, and automatic responses. It influences our thoughts, behaviors, and emotions without our active control. This vast reservoir shapes much of our daily life, guiding habitual actions and reactions.

not consciousness itself. This is why we talk about 'falling back' or 'resting' behind the mind. Any attempt to actively focus (like using attention) pulls you out of simply being in consciousness, as it engages the mind and activates the ego.

The good news though is that you **can** enter consciousness via experimentation and meditation – which is what this book is about.

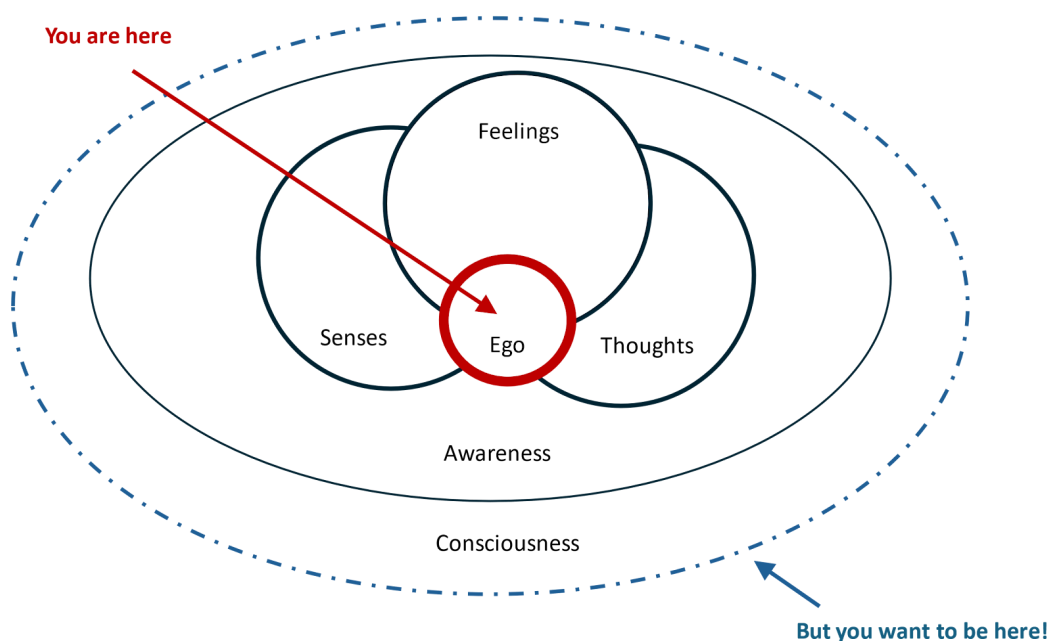
Non-dualism is the philosophical and spiritual concept that there is no fundamental separation between the self and the universe, recognizing all as one unified reality, that there is only consciousness. When beginning meditation this will sound very odd but once you get more into the practice you will get glimpses (very short moments of deep insight, they may last for only mere seconds at first) that will point to this. You can (and should) study Zen, Advaita, Dzogchen or other Buddhist based literature (preferably with a teacher) to get a better grasp of this concept. For now, I ask you to take a leap of faith – let's for the duration of this book assume that consciousness is an open space in you and even extending beyond you. That there are just experiences (objects) in consciousness; there is no 'you' – there is just your ego talking to you and 'you' believing that that is you!

My hope is that the 9-day meditation challenge will give you a few glimpses of what consciousness is; that ego is just a contraction while consciousness is vast and open, and cannot be disturbed and thus is peace itself. If you ever felt love then you already know consciousness, as feeling love is just the temporary collapse (or release) of ego - your experience of beauty is the same - the finite experience when being in ego space can temporarily widen as consciousness is infinite. Consciousness is the union between awareness and emptiness and the bridge to selflessness.

The ego and the resolution of reality

Remember that one of the roles of your ego was narrator? Your narrator filters experiences through your biases, fears, and attachments, shaping a personalized and distorted version of reality. This results in a lower resolution of experience because the ego selectively highlights and interprets information that reinforces its existing beliefs and narratives, rather than perceiving events as they truly are. The richness and fullness of direct experience are diminished, obscured by the ego's constant need to protect and validate its sense of self. It's you doing a video call with reality with terrible phone reception, using an old phone that is bug ridden and has 2000's bandwidth - video is low resolution and just horribly pixelated and lagging all the time, sound is static, noisy, hollow and robotic. Time for an upgrade!

If you were to ask an enlightened person to describe their reality; the answer would be about the beauty of the world with a deep sense of profound awareness and presence. Seeing each moment as unique and precious, free from the distractions of past regrets or future anxieties. Perception is clear and unclouded, appreciating the intricate details of nature, art, and human connection. Colors appear more vivid, sounds more harmonious, and even the simplest experiences are imbued with a sense of wonder. Feeling a deep sense of connection to all living things, recognizing the interconnectedness of life and the inherent beauty in diversity. This state of being enables one to find joy and peace in the present moment, fully embracing the world with open-hearted acceptance and gratitude.



The ego and impermanence

Everything is constantly changing; nothing is static or solid – all is impermanent. The ego resists change because it can signify danger. The ego doesn't want or even fully comprehend change. And you already know this – everybody knows that things are changing all the time but hardly anybody **lives** like things are changing all the time. The ego prefers attachment as this provides a sense of stability and identity. Attachments – to people, possessions, roles, stories, or beliefs – help the ego define and reinforce a consistent sense of self, offering security and continuity in an ever-changing world.

The ego switches between past and future, projecting hopes and desires onto the future while also anchoring itself in past stories to preserve its identity. This is why it's hard for you to *be in the now*.

The ego's attachment stems from a sense of fear. Fear of instability, uncertainty, or loss drives the ego to cling to attachments to create a stable and predictable sense of self. These attachments provide the ego with security and reinforce its identity, helping to alleviate the underlying anxiety about impermanence, this makes sense from an evolutionary perspective:

1. Survival Instinct:

- a) Predictability and safety: evolutionarily, attachment to stable resources and relationships increased chances of survival. Early humans needed reliable sources of food, protection, and social bonds for successful reproduction and safety.
- b) Social bonding: strong social bonds and attachments facilitated cooperation and support within groups, which was crucial for survival and successful child-rearing.

2. Reinforcement of social structures:

- a) Group cohesion: attachment to social roles and group identities helped maintain social cohesion and structure, enhancing the stability of social groups and contributing to individual and collective survival.

3. Emotional regulation:

- a) Stress response: attachment mechanisms provided emotional support and reduced stress, which could enhance overall well-being and adaptive functioning in challenging environments.

The ego and its trickery

Why have so few people reached enlightenment or self-realization? The answer lies in the fact that the ego has been shaped by 300,000 years of conditioning. It's an ancient and resilient force with numerous strategies designed to protect itself. To understand this better, let's examine these strategies and view the ego as to what it is; a complex entity focused on developing and employing optimal survival strategies. The ego creates the illusion of being real by using various mechanisms that foster a strong sense of identity and separation. Here's how:

1. Identification with thoughts and emotions:

- a) Constant stream of thoughts: the ego generates a continuous stream of thoughts, often repetitive and self-referential, making it easy to mistake these thoughts for your true self.
- b) Emotional attachment: by attaching strong emotions to these thoughts, the ego reinforces their significance and reality.

2. Creating a personal narrative:

- a) Life story: the ego constructs a personal narrative, weaving together past experiences, memories, and future aspirations into a cohesive story. This narrative gives a sense of continuity and identity.
- b) Roles and labels: It assigns roles, labels, and identities (e.g., smart, dumb, professional, victim) that seem to define who you are.

3. Perceived control and agency:

- a) Illusion of control: the ego creates the illusion that you are in control of your life and decisions, reinforcing the belief in a separate, autonomous self.
- b) Sense of agency: by emphasizing your role as the doer of actions, the ego strengthens the identification with personal achievements and failures.

4. Comparison and judgment:

- a) Comparison with others: the ego constantly compares you to others, fostering a sense of superiority or inferiority, both of which reinforce the sense of a separate self.
- b) Judgment: It judges situations, people, and experiences as good or bad, further entrenching dualistic thinking and separation.

5. Attachment and aversion:

- a) Desires and fears: the ego creates strong attachments to desires and aversions to fears, making it seem like these are essential aspects of who you are.
- b) Pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain: this cycle keeps you focused on the external world and the ego's agenda, rather than on inner awareness.

6. Validation and approval:

- a) Seeking validation: the ego seeks validation and approval from others, linking your self-worth to external opinions and achievements.
- b) Fear of rejection: fear of rejection or criticism reinforces the need to conform to the ego's identity.

7. Survival mechanism:

- a) Basic instincts: the ego taps into basic survival instincts, convincing you that its narratives and strategies are necessary for your physical and psychological survival.
- b) Fight or flight: It activates stress responses that make the ego's concerns feel urgent and real.

8. Resistance to change:

- a) Fear of the unknown: the ego fears the dissolution of its identity and resists change, maintaining the status quo.
- b) Comfort zone: it keeps you within a familiar comfort zone, where the ego's narratives are continuously reinforced.

From the ego's perspective, these mechanisms are entirely justified, as it sees itself as the protector of your life. However, many 'challenges' we encounter today (someone cutting you off in traffic, getting a comment about your looks, etc) are not life-threatening, but rather just trigger egoic reactions. Our brains haven't adapted to the complexities of the modern world - evolution just isn't that rapid. Fortunately, by understanding these mechanisms, we can strategically deconstruct the ego, as we will do in the meditation challenge chapter. You just wait, ego!

Meditation

Most beginning meditators start with *concentration meditation* which involves directing your attention to a single point of focus; an object, a sound, a sensation, or the breath. The primary goal is to train the mind to stay fixed on this point, minimizing distractions and cultivating a sense of focused awareness.

This can be very helpful to feel what focused awareness is (and understand that it shifts). Yet, this type of meditation is also hard to maintain as it is inherently dualistic - it is an activity of the mind. There is the subject (you) and object (breath for example), a process of control and active effort to direct the mind, and ego involvement (maintaining focus and dismissing distractions, reinforcing the sense of an active doer), but more importantly, and what I believe is the main reason why people give up; the goal oriented nature of this practice towards its outcome - which will just reinforce the dualistic nature of self-assessment ('oh no! I got lost in thought again! I'm terrible at this').

In the next chapter we will start with the 9-day meditation challenge where we will do one day of concentration meditation and then go into self-inquiry meditation that is geared towards deconstructing the ego step by step. The idea behind this setup is that afterwards you are ready to meditate at any time during the day and in any place; in the supermarket, at home or when you are intimate with your lover – and then experience how your meditative state of mind changes your perspective on reality and influences your actions. This is what meditation should be about; you should not start meditation to become a meditator – you integrate it into your daily life and *live it*.

During the challenge, we will go deeper into the concepts of the container versus content of your thoughts. For now, it's good to understand that they are the two sides of the same coin, both deserving attention if you're serious about personal development. Enhancing the quality of your thoughts' content belongs to the realms of therapy, personal growth workshops, shadow work, and the like - but this should not be your final destination. The ability to step back from the mind, disengage from the content of thoughts (whether they are of high or low quality), and recognize the ego for what it truly is, is a more profound and essential skill to cultivate. While these approaches can intersect, or maybe meet in the middle, and both are necessary on your journey - don't get stuck in just optimizing the quality of content of thought.

The 9-day meditation challenge

The 9-day meditation challenge asks you to meditate each day for nine consecutive days and to commit to that. See each day as an experiment – and understand that you will go (a little) out of your comfort zone on some days. The first day may feel silly, but then you may also find yourself in a serious and deep contemplation just a few days later – your ego will certainly have opinions about things ... good! That only helps the process. It only takes you 7 minutes per day. Some days those 7 minutes will feel like an eternity but know that it's only 0.0000166% of your life³. Some days you will want to go longer – that is totally fine – extend it as long as you want. Try not to miss a day, but if you do then pick it up again as soon as possible. You want to redo a day? That is also fine. Also try to do it in the morning, but also for this, if that doesn't work for you another time in the day is also fine. Do one day at a time; try not to read ahead to see what the upcoming days bring - there is a reason for the structure and timing of things - let each day be a surprise once you get there.

Each day has the same structure, you start with a short opening ritual that will help in externalizing the ego and then you do the 7-minute meditation. As for posture; sit on a chair or a cushion, keep your back straight and try not to move. Eyes open - just have a soft look outwards, just gaze in front of you and let the light enter your eyes. After your meditation you read the daily contemplation to take along in the day. You may want to make some notes of what insights come up. The opening ritual is based on the mettā concept in Buddhism and resembles prayers used in many religions – it's important to say out loud as your ego will need to hear itself say it (there are neurological reasons for this⁴). It's essentially a letting-go of the mind that will set up the proper psychological context for the upcoming meditation. At first this will feel a bit weird, talking out loud when you are alone feels strange, but on day nine you will start to see what this small ritual can give you. Trust me.

³ Assuming you reach 80

⁴ There is a lot to say about the effect but for now just understand that verbalizing the text is crucial for it to work – just saying the words in your head won't do the trick. if you can't say it out loud because you don't have enough privacy then just whisper it to yourself – so that you still hear yourself say it, even if it's very quietly.

The format of the opening ritual is:

1. Opening – Address an entity that is bigger than you; the Universe, Nature, God, Spirit, Brahman, Consciousness – it doesn't really matter. For example, start with 'Dear Universe'.
2. Gratitude – the reason to be grateful is that your ego will become humbler, not be so caught up in itself. There are many things you can be grateful for⁵.
3. Guidance – ask for guidance for the day or for the meditation itself, this will externalize your failures and successes – this also tells the ego to let go⁶.
4. Closing - a simple Thank you, or Amen, or 'So be it' – or something longer 'If that is thy will then thy will be done, Amen' is fine.

Once you remember the structure (after a few days) then try not to think too much about it, just let things come up for the gratitude and guidance parts and say them out loud. Try to let go and go into flow – and remember, it's all just practicing – that means it doesn't need to be perfect!

Here's an example:

Dear Universe,

Thank you for giving me the strength to do the 9-day meditation challenge, and thank you for the rain on the rooftop this morning that woke me up so gently, thank you for giving me a healthy body, thank you for the food I can eat today, thank you for giving me the courage to honestly talk to my partner about my problems, thank you that my father reached out to me yesterday, thank you for allowing me to do this meditation in silence today.

Please guide me today to stay open and vulnerable and help me with being honest towards my partner about the mess I made in the kitchen.

Thank you.

⁵ Some inspiration: being grateful that you are healthy, that you have a house, that you live in a safe country, that you have food, that you have loved ones, that you have freedom, that you have the luxury to take time to meditate, that it took 13.7 billion years for the universe to give you this exact moment. You can be grateful for any situation that is terrible and **not** happening to you. And of course it can be very personal; being thankful for the beautiful flowers that were given to you, that you can spend time in nature today, that your mother is doing better than last week, that you had a deep conversation with a friend, that you can hug your child, etc.

⁶ For guidance, essentially you want to externalize things that your ego cannot solve for you – some examples: Please guide me in letting go, in keeping my heart open towards my partner, to learn to be a bit braver each day, to be honest to myself and others, to be open about my addictions to friends, to allow me to go deeper in this meditation, etc.

Meditation challenge - Day 1 – Senses

Good that you are here! Good for you that you are taking up the challenge! The first day is not too hard. Today your practice is to sit still – no distractions – no music or generated sounds (phone on airplane mode). Sit straight up. On a chair or on a cushion. Ideally in a fairly quiet place. Being outside (preferably in nature) is fine, it's even better. Set a timer on your phone for 7 minutes. Eyes open, no need to focus on anything just gaze and let the light enter your eyes.

Transport yourself back to when you were an eight-year-old kid, and you had this feeling of playfulness towards new experiences and experimentation. You weren't the grown-up yet that takes everything so very seriously, no, you were just a kid that loved imagining things – fun was your thing! Use this frame of mind during this meditation – keep it playful. Now, imagine that you are your eight-year-old-self, and you are a robot with sensors, a sensor for light (your eyes), a sensor for sound (ears), tactile sensors (skin), etc. During the 7 minutes the only task you have is to sense, that's it. Try playing with the resolution (sensitivity) of your sensors. What that means is, you can 'just listen' or you can really focus on sounds and give it total and deep attention. The same for temperatures; you can experiment with zooming in on feeling temperatures or air movement on your skin. You are free to switch from one sense to another and change the sensitivity of that specific sensor.

You will also get thoughts; those are totally fine. It's the background processing of the robot, the Operating System if you will, that is doing various tasks, updating stuff, making sure the robot doesn't break down, etc. But your main task is to sense, so each time you find you get caught up in some background Operating System routine inside the robot go back to being the sensory machine. Now if you hear the timer go off after those 7 minutes and you want to do it longer that is totally fine too. Don't forget to start with the opening ritual!

Have fun, robot!

For after the meditation - your contemplation and practice for the rest of the day; try to go into 'deep sensory' mode for one of your sensors during some moments today when you can, for example; on the bus, listen carefully – totally focus on just hearing, or in the office feel the desk with your hand – feel all the tiny details of everything slowly with the tips of your fingers and totally focus on the tactile senses, if you walk outside focus on just smelling – focus on that sensation with everything. Contemplation: notice if there are changes in your thought patterns when focusing on one of your senses, and what happens is you dial up the sensitivity for that sense.

Meditation challenge - Day 2 – Thoughts

How did the meditation yesterday go? Were you able to change the sensitivity of some of your sensors? And if so, did you notice other senses and thoughts moving more to the background? You were focusing your beam of awareness. Attention is an interesting thing to play around with.

Did you also notice that thoughts can sneak up on you? Sometimes you find yourself suddenly amid thoughts without realizing how you even got there. All quite normal!

Today we practice the basics of your new meditation form. Your mind is generating thoughts – you do not do this yourself. In that sense it is not ‘you’ that is thinking. Once thoughts get any type of attention from you (you reject them, start analyzing, etc.) they get stronger. The key is to do nothing - to step back – to fall back behind the mind. That will allow them to follow their natural flow; they will just disappear as everything else. Once you realize that you are not the thinker – you can also change your attitude towards the thoughts – no longer be drawn to the content of them. What we will practice today is looking at the phenomenon of thoughts – so essentially move to a higher abstraction. There are containers of thought – and there is content in those containers – don’t meddle with the content. Every time you notice that you get lost in thought you are engaging with content; let go – disengage, release yourself from the need to do anything with the content in the container. Also notice that there are very subtle mechanics at work in you that will still want to look at the content! Bad ego! Bad! Keep it light and humorous – just be interested to see the subtle layers of you wanting to interact with the content. Just let go. In the beginning you may have to let go almost every few seconds – that is totally fine. It’s practice! No need to do it perfectly.

Don’t forget to start with the opening ritual! Sit still, eyes open. Same as yesterday. There you go, 7 minutes of what will be your core meditation.

For after the meditation, use today to inspect your thoughts as a phenomena as a neutral scientist – be objective about the things you see – try not to get involved with the content. Set two reminders on your phone so you don’t forget. If you look at the structure of thoughts, do you recognize that most of them relate to another thought? That they are (inter) linked? Or that it’s just a repeated thought? Can you feel that some thoughts pull you in? That they have a very ‘needy’ quality to them? Can you sense that your feelings are constantly reacting to thoughts, even so minutely? Can you better grasp the difference between the container versus its content? Be the scientist today, you are your own brain doctor!

Meditation challenge - Day 3 - Feelings

Today we look at feelings. Intuitively you can probably sense that feelings are more inside the body, are slower and softer and have the ability to spread inside you as opposed to thoughts that are in your headspace, are quicker and can feel sharp, even a bit sterile and narrow.

Falling behind the mind and feeling go hand in hand. You don't interfere with thoughts and neither with feelings - you let them flow through you. Easier said than done right? There is a subtlety here that is important to understand: thoughts are generally quick, feelings slow - so the non-interference on your side takes longer for feelings and they have a subtly different flavor too; feelings have a residual imprint on your being and you sense that happening during the feeling itself. Rejecting a feeling is often on this level; the ego being scared of the residual imprint, even how subtly so. It's impermanence at play; your ego senses that the feeling will change you (which it will). So, If you let it, then the old you won't be there any more! Your ego doesn't want that, and that in itself is unsettling to you - and hence you resist. Try this; allow first to see or taste that you are resisting the change, fall back behind the mind, relax and allow the fear of that change to overwhelm you, give it some time to let it settle. Once you start embracing the fear of change the feeling itself will start flowing - you will go back and forth between embracing and contracting - this is normal and can easily take 10 minutes or longer when you start out. Don't act, just be there to feel.

For your meditation today, remember something that gave you lots of feelings - that had an emotional impact on you; a fight, a breakup, even death - some situation that made you sad, angry, etc. Go back to it and let it fill you up, fall behind the mind and allow all to be. Can you sense the fear of the residual change underneath? Embrace it. Don't forget your opening ritual. There you go, 7 minutes of introspection on the intricacies of feeling.

During every meal you have today - eat slower than usual, fall back behind the mind and see if you can notice what feelings are underneath thoughts - they can be very subtle. Gaze into the world and relax, nothing to do but to drop down to feeling while you are slowly consuming your food. No need for perfection! Just practice.

Meditation challenge - Day 4 – Doing less

Meditation is about doing less, not more. It involves letting go of control and of non-interference, allowing the mind to settle into a state of pure awareness and stillness. Now this is the opposite of what your mind normally does (as you already know!). Your mind doesn't like doing nothing – that's not what it was made for! So, for today we will practice doing nothing. Sensations, feelings and thoughts will come up; you will feel an itch on your knee, lots and lots of thoughts will arise and maybe some deeper sadness or tears will come up – whatever happens - you don't interfere, you just are there with those things.

So, more specifically, how do you do nothing? Doing nothing is the opposite of doing anything – any-thing - any action. It is the opposite of being active or reactive. So, liking or disliking thoughts or feelings is activity, mentally pulling or pushing thoughts is activity. Going into a thought, or analyzing a thought, is doing something. Having an opinion on a thought is doing something. Thinking about not having a thought is doing something. Thinking you are doing it wrong is doing something. Thinking you are doing it right is doing something. Trying to have other thoughts is doing something. Even observing a thought is already doing something. Do nothing. Just be. Rest. Really rest in your place. Thoughts will keep coming - just do nothing. Like you are standing in a field when a tornado touches down and things start swirling around you – houses, cars, anything – just stand there like a concrete statue that is unmovable. When you feel you are doing something let go – stop it. Release. Disengage. When you fail, stop thinking that you failed. Even when you are in the middle of a thought - release. If you find that letting go is hard for you, you can say to yourself 'just let go' at any time – and then just let that go too. Release. Again. And again. Letting-go is not a 'one time thing' it is a continuous process – so you just keep letting go, maybe even every second! Falling back behind the mind is in its essence letting go. There you go! 7 minutes of letting go. Don't forget the opening ritual – and maybe include asking the universe for some guidance and help in letting go :)

For after the meditation - your practice for the rest of the day; try to let go in one situation where you would normally not let go – and do the opposite. For example, somebody cuts you off in traffic – you just let them – you even give them extra space. Somebody says something nasty to you, you let it go and say, 'thank you for the feedback'. Afterwards, analyze - what did that do for you? What areas in your life need some letting go of? Contemplate.

Meditation challenge - Day 5 – Death

You died yesterday. Your heart just stopped – a combination of an unfortunate blood clot and your heart artery that had an imperfection that nobody knew about. You were alone in your room, lying on your bed with your phone in your hand. They found you five hours later.

Today would have been a gift – the biggest gift – you would have given all your possessions for that gift; you would just be sitting here reading these words.

You felt it yesterday when you had that strange pain in your left arm and chest, and you somehow knew death was coming. You wished you could live another day, just to be here on this wildly strange planet of ours. Just to see the morning sunlight and feel her warmth, smell the fresh pine trees and tell people what they mean to you – even for a last time.

The next 7 minutes are sacred. They are everything. Sit. Feel. Be. Fall back behind the mind and let go like you practiced the preceding days. Death will not give you a choice - you will have to let go. Don't forget the opening ritual – go into flow and feel what comes up. Speak it.

For after the meditation - your contemplation and practice for the rest of the day; today is a day for feeling. Focus on what you feel and what arises. Contemplate your existence and essence. In your deepest depths – what is important to you? Don't think it – feel it. Do you have many thoughts? Then try to lower yourself more towards the feelings below the thoughts. Use the knowledge from day three on how feelings work. Practice falling back behind your mind as this will help you with that. You have all day. What a gift, this day.

Meditation challenge - Day 6 – Compassion

Look around on a busy street, do you see all these people? Do you realize that many of them are caught up in their own mind story? Their own neurosis? Can you relate to that feeling of being in claustrophobic egoic headspace? Do you understand that they didn't choose this? That the man at the bus stop is anxious about his new job and convinced he will fail and didn't sleep at all. Or that the cashier who looked down to the ground was just insecure about her looks because she was bullied as a child? Can you feel compassion for them? Can you understand that they are missing deeply beautiful things in life due to their low-resolution reality? Can you see that their ego contraction and anxieties are not by choice? Can you be selfless towards them? Can you be totally open to them? Will you try to be pure awareness so they can shelter in your loving presence? Will you be the one that will help them – in any way that is needed? The only way for you to truly help them is to cut through your own ego identification first.

All the problems in your life, the tensions you feel, the issues in your relationships, the repressed anger, the addictions, etc. are merely symptoms; they are just the surface indicators of ego contraction.

Today, 7 minutes of meditation and contemplation of what the ego does to people. You are the scientist in the lab of your own brain – what a place to be! look at those thoughts! I mean really look at them! And then take some distance and fall back and look again, then take some more distance and look again. Can you see what thoughts do? Can you see what it does to all those people? What it does to you? Can you feel that your own ego talk is the only thing keeping you from being totally selfless? Don't forget your opening ritual!

For after the meditation – be selfless for a day. Be compassionate. Realize that most people are not doing bad things because they are evil, but because they are caught up in ego contraction. Understand that you are making steps to self-realization. Be the Buddha for a day. Just say something nice to somebody, one real compliment for another human in the street. Do something small to help somebody. Experiment! See what comes up when you are compassionate – see what the aftertaste is when you do.

Meditation challenge - Day 7 – Life

Every moment is an insight. Everything is exactly happening as it is supposed to happen. Now, you are free to mindfuck about any of the thoughts you have about the now, the past, or the future... Just go ahead! But it won't change the deeper nature of what is. You are experiencing the things you need to experience, and you can either recognize this deeper truth, or you can let your mind go make up stories about things. Your choice. Once you realize, embody and incarnate this truth you will also understand that letting go is easy, because letting go is the same as understanding the fundamental nature of things. Just be. Watch and feel this incredible, rich and deep movie we call life, relax, deepen your understanding, and breathe. Practice this every day, each moment.

Life is a conspiracy to wake you up. Today we are taking a leap of faith and accept this as truth.

Today you will again be the scientist in the lab of your mind. Meditate & investigate – take some distance from your thoughts and dissect them a little. Meditate on the nature of your control – note how thoughts are essentially control structures – how

they try to manipulate you into thinking that you are in control – and that there is this subtle feeling of importance to many of your thoughts. When you ‘taste’ thoughts you can almost feel that they want to convince you to believe them! Can you see this? Contemplate if it's even possible to have control if you don't control your thoughts. Try to be a critical scientist that wants to understand these things. Don't forget your opening ritual, and then 7 minutes of meditation – remember – fall back behind the mind – let go.

For after the meditation – today is your leap of faith day – everything today is just an experience, an insight - and not personal or about you - try to adopt that mindset for the whole day. Maybe you can sense that falling back behind the mind is just this – it's the same thing! There is no need to worry, there is no need to even think about things as everything is just happening as it is supposed to happen. Can you feel the inherent freedom in this? Tonight, when you go to bed, contemplate how this mindset changed your day.

Meditation challenge - Day 8 – Thank you ego!

Start today with your opening ritual, afterwards read the italic quoted text below out loud, alternatively you can also include it in the gratitude part of your opening ritual.

“Dear ego, thank you so much for all the hard work you have done – all the effort from when I was a small child. Thank you for protecting me all these years from the bad and dangerous things that were on my path. You made me feel safe when it was needed. Thank you for giving me direction and allowing me to enjoy good talks with friends and family. Thank you for all the humor and laughs, creativity and plans with which you instilled me. Thank you for giving me an identity – a role that made sense to me in social contexts and always tried to figure things out for me. Thank you for working so hard! Today I want to let go of you for a little – see if I can also cope on my own. Will you help me with that ego? Thank you.”

Your ego is not your enemy. When you were young it was important and essential to build a strong ego, to protect you from many things. Your ego doesn't need to go away – you just need to see it as what it is; it is not you. It's an old mechanism we humans developed for our survival. On the experiential level it's just an appearance in consciousness that you confuse to be you – it's just thoughts that have a lot of “me” and “I” in there which you mistake to be about you – but it's just the ego's script writing and narration in action!

Today, we again fall back behind the mind - and you may also start to understand by now that this is more of a feel-thing than a think-thing – it's a sense you are developing, that you sense you are behind the mind and learn to stay there more and more. Today we do it with a deep love for the ego, for all its hard work, knowing that it's there to safeguard us. So when ego speaks, be grateful and softly smile towards it. Remember all the lessons and insights from the previous days; don't go into the containers of thought – just let them float by - it's just your ego doing its daily job. Let go. Release. Just be. There you go! Set your time, 7 minutes of practicing being grateful stillness itself.

For after the meditation – for today set some repeated timers, when the timer goes off take a minute to sit still – to see how your mind has been working so hard. You can silently say to yourself “Thank you mind! Pfew! Good work” and then fall back behind the mind. Take a deep breath and then take some distance – give your ego some off time – it needs it – and you too!

Meditation challenge - Day 9 – Being you

Your last formal day! So cool you made it all the way. Today we integrate and get ready to embed meditation into daily life.

If you are not your ego then who are you? Who is the one falling back behind the mind? Who is the one seeing the difference between content and container? It can't be your ego as that is just content... can you sense the difference between being the active one and the passive one? Can you let things happen to you? Truly, truly let go? Surrender to what is? Anything from a facial expression, to thoughts, sadness and pain or a feeling arising?

Consciousness is the stuff your experiences are made of. Consciousness is the essence, the fabric of your experiences. That is what it means on an intellectual level when we say *you are consciousness* - senses, thoughts and feelings dynamically fill the space of consciousness. You are not your hardware (body) - you are the software (consciousness), you are not a thing - you are a process.

When you look at your hand it is projected into consciousness, when you touch a table with that hand the experience of solidity is projected into consciousness. Even time is a projection. For you personally consciousness is the only thing you are experiencing - there is nothing else. When you look at something the watcher and the thing being watched both get projected, mapped to the same space. Both are the same thing - both are just projections in consciousness. Can you sense this fundamental shift in understanding of what your experience is? Of what you are? Can you see that there are only experiences?

For your meditation today just sit and gaze as you have been doing the preceding days. When you gaze, see that the watcher (you) and the thing being watched (object, world, reality) are the same. That both are mapped into the same space. You are that space, the software, the neural activity in which all things arise. Sit with this and observe that sensing this will feel the same as falling back behind the mind. Take your 7 minutes, or longer if you need to, to let this understanding sink in.

For today – see what is being projected into consciousness. Just be and watch.

In closing

Try to keep practicing! Either with repeated timers or notifications on your phone, little (fun) paper notes scattered around your home or any other creative ways to remind yourself to fall back behind the mind. You can repeat some of the earlier days, but the main thing is to start practicing during your normal day routine – in any place and any situation at any time. And try to notice how (for example) social exchanges change once you fall back behind the mind – once you are more open and less contracted – more silence is instilled in you. Now, you will go in and out of ego the whole time, this is normal – don't try to get enlightened (setting that as a goal will not help you) – understand that it's normal to fluctuate between mind and no-mind, ego contraction and pure awareness – it's not a binary thing, you will move on this spectrum the whole day long.

The direct path to self-realization is to understand that you are already there. That there is nothing to do – that you are already consciousness. That your true nature is not contraction but openness. But this paradoxical step of doing something (reading this book, and accepting the challenge) towards understanding that you are just consciousness is a giant leap – so see it in this way; your treasure trove of glimpses will slowly fill up and some day you will realize that there was nothing to do in the first place, and you will laugh and let go of that too.

Appendix - Meditation toolkit

You may want to keep practicing meditation as a contained practice like you did in the challenge; here are some building blocks and pointers to design your own routine, it's your own little meditation toolkit, feel free to add your own things that help you in your practice.

- Keep doing your opening ritual! Doesn't matter when, before dinner, when waking up, when going to bed or at some other random time. It's a powerful tool to let the ego into release mode, to surrender.
- When it's hard to leave the content in the container of thought alone you can say to yourself; "container" to remind yourself to disengage, to notice you get drawn to the content but want to step back. If it's fuzzy when a thought comes up you can also say "thought" when you have a thought, make sure to also say it if you're in doubt if the thought is actually a thought (it is :)
- If your mind is very active before a meditation then start with a 4-7-8 breathing. Close your eyes, breathe in through your nose to the count of four. Hold the breath to the count of seven. Exhale through your mouth to the count of eight. Do this at least 4 times in a row. Then start your meditation.
- If you get stuck in a mind loop, or some very active mind contraction, or intense feelings then ask Universe/God/Spirit to help you. Do it out loud just like in the opening ritual. For example; "Dear Universe, will you please help me to let go, to just be, to give me some peace of mind. I cannot do this by myself, please give me some guidance. Thank you". Do it multiple times if needed, surrender to something that is bigger than you. You can do this in the middle of a meditation (or in the middle of the day if you need it).

- Remember day one, being the sensory robot? An interesting exercise is to figure out which of your senses has the greatest capability to focus - try each sense for some time and then adjust the focus/sensitivity. For most concentration practices the breath is used, but you may find out that for you another sense works much better! Being able to use one of your senses for full concentration can be helpful if the mind is just too active and you fail to fall back behind the mind. Maybe listening is really powerful for you - being able to fully focus on the surrounding sounds and thereby pushing thoughts and feelings more to the background. Sometimes it's nice to have such a tool to bootstrap the process of falling back behind the mind.
- If you want to do some more edgy meditating you can try to pinch yourself or sit on something very uncomfortable and practice to be present with the pain. Also experiment with 'not wanting the pain' versus totally accepting the pain (focusing on it, going into it - just like with the robot meditation on day one). Note the difference. You can do the same with pleasurable experiences; integrate sex, drugs and rock&roll into your meditation. Remember, meditating is for any situation at any time.
- If you want to make it a bit harder for yourself then try to meditate during conflict, during stressful business meetings, on the dancefloor, during dating.
- Make your own meditation spot, make it beautiful so you want to sit there, add some flowers, some candles, little notes, etc.