

The Cure for Monkey Mind

Conventional wisdom states: first impressions count. Conventional wisdom states: the initial vibration that radiates off a person and hits you like light beams or sound waves lets you know if said person is sinner or saint. Conventional wisdom states: you have the ability to subconsciously interpret subtle body movement, twitchy eyebrows and flicks of the wrist, and instinctively know whether a person is predisposed to running a puppy mill or rescuing dolphins caught in fishing nets using pruning shears and Vaseline.

I am skeptical. Maybe because I am frequently wrong; maybe my transmission tower is down. I am the person on the news stating that the sociopath next door seemed to be the quietest little thing, always popping in to see if you needed anything at the store when he ran out to restock on fava beans and Chianti. Mostly I am skeptical because I believe people often get a false first impression of me. “She’s always so calm. She has so much patience. She’s sweet.” As if I am floating around in a Zen-like gelatinous goo where butterflies and daisies co-exist with robins that sing ladybugs sweetly to sleep before gobbling them up. To which I respond: if only you could see inside me because my insides don’t match my outside. To which I respond: if only you could see inside my monkey mind.

The idea of having a monkey mind comes from Buddhist philosophy. It is the idea that thoughts constantly swing around inside our brains like the aforementioned primates. Now, that may conjure up the idea of a certain level of activity, of long-armed primates swinging gracefully through the vines like so many lithe trapeze artists drifting through the space time continuum. Not so my mind. My mind is like the monkey house at the zoo after the keeper has accidentally left behind the entire 10000 gram jumbo bag of pixie stix from Costco. Along with an espresso

maker. And the instructions to use it. In monkey talk. The monkey house is loud. Screaming, ear-piercing. Frenetic. Hairy. Monkeys flinging themselves around, hitting off the insides of my skull. Poking their fingers into the backs of my eyes.

To those who do not suffer from monkey mind, I envy you. I admire you. I want to be you. Monkey mind makes me irritable and short with the people I love the most. It makes me break out. It gives me a bad belly. It steals sleep. Thoughts go round and round all night long. I am not plagued by thoughts of the apocalypse or of asteroids hitting the earth (although I had to put down a book I was reading at bedtime about lava bubbles under Yellowstone Park and the associated impending cataclysmic volcanic doom). Instead my mind plays endless reels regarding, but not exclusive to:

1. Trouble in my intimate relationships (i.e. divorce)
2. Money troubles (i.e. bankruptcy)
3. Bad attitudes of offspring and their subsequent descent into juvenile delinquency and federal penitentiaries
4. parent-teacher meetings (me as parent)
5. parent-teacher meetings (me as teacher)
6. Unfinished English assignments
7. Not having the snow tires on the car yet
8. Death

Now, I have never been to therapy or taken Prozac or any of its extended relations. I am not a crier. I am generally incapable of indulging myself in long, cleansing sessions of weeping in order to rid the toxins and stress from my system. I am not a runner, able to pound my frustrations out over miles. I do not conduct long gab sessions with girlfriends in which we

analyze and dissect. There *was* a period of time involving a large amount of red wine (I wouldn't quite say *gallons*) but that is (for the most part) in the past.

A coping mechanism has presented itself to me, however; something that helps me get through the crazy in my head and in my day. I initially found myself in a yoga class for purely physical reasons. Like dating a linebacker or a snowboarder, the mental benefits were not immediately apparent. I hoped to gain physical strength and flexibility. I hoped to tone all the bits and pieces that had gotten a little floopy post-babies. I had not anticipated the mental aspect of it. I had not imagined I would find stillness in my head.

The silence in the studio envelops. You walk barefoot to a spot on the cool hardwood floor and lay out your mat. The back door opens onto a wooded lot and in the summer it is left propped open to allow the breeze to dance in, filled with birdsong and sunlight. There are candles, the lights are dimmed. The session begins with quiet seated meditation. You concentrate on your breath, on the gentle cycle of inhalation and exhalation. You are directed to look at those thoughts flying around your head. Watch the monkeys play their games. Watch them tumble and wrestle and yell and then let them fall out of your vision. You are encouraged to acknowledge every one that pops his head up, watching you with mischievous or malicious eyes, bright and button like and beady, and let him fall out of your line of sight again. Start watching your breath instead. The slow wave of it filling the balloon your lungs underneath your collarbone and way down into the depths of your diaphragm, your thighs, your knee joints, your toes. In and out.

When the lights come up a little, the serious stuff starts. You move slowly through some gentle poses, stretching muscles, lubricating joints. The pips and pops of loosening vertebrae emanate from around the studio. Cat, cow; arching and doming the back. An initial downward

dog; making yourself into an inverted vee, a little tent of humanity on the floor. Everything that you are contained under the little roof you make with the skin of your arms and back and legs. Then the more challenging flora and fauna. Eagle pose. Tree pose. The crow, the camel, the cobra, the feathered peacock. The sleeping swan. Inverted, bent, bound, twisted.

Yoga is all about the details. I wasn't prepared for the physicality of it. Your muscles ache. You are asked to explore the difference between discomfort and pain and if that's the discussion you have going on in your mind and it pertains to what is physically happening in your body at that moment, it is difficult for the monkeys to tiptoe in, to sneak in, and to slink in. You start focusing on all those other animals in the zoo, in the forest, in the jungle, and those monkeys begin to vanish. Once you start thinking about the exact alignment of toes and arches, the placement of the eyes of your elbows, about where your shoulder blades are sitting on your back, those monkeys start to disappear. And by the end of the hour, when you stretch out in shavasana, corpse pose, the jungle is quiet. The room lies in shadow. Candles flicker. The wind of your breath rustles through the leafy trees of your mind. The jungle is quiet. You find a little peace.