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WHY JOHNNY CAN'T MEDITATE

In the East, the tendency of the mind to wander has long been recognized as an impediment to making progress in the spiritual life. For example, Patanjali states in the *Yoga Sutras* that “Yoga is the inhibition of the modifications of the mind.” The term *modification* refers to the natural inclination of the mind to engage in restless and perpetual movement. In the *Crest Jewel of Wisdom*, Shankaracharya lists the qualification of *samādhāna*—the ability to avoid idle thoughts while focusing the mind solely on Truth or Brahman. In more recent times, Krishnamurti tells us in *At the Feet of the Master* that we should develop the quality of one-pointedness by giving our full attention to whatever task is at hand.

Modernity tends to equate progress largely with advances made in science and technology. Ironically, some of those advances are what make it so difficult to achieve the mental habit of one-pointedness. Due to the relentless encroachment of technology into every facet of our lives, we are faced with a growing number of attractive distractions that spiritual aspirants of earlier times never had to face.

One of the main culprits is the Internet. In his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr describes the problem. “Dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators, and Web designers point to the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning.”

Think about it. The typical Web page is filled with ads, pop-ups, videos, and embedded hot links—all serving to disperse our attention as though it were a steel ball in a pinball machine.

Carr continues: “Psychological research long ago proved what most of us know from experience: frequent interruptions scatter our thoughts, weaken our memory, and make us tense and anxious.” Is it any coincidence that attention spans seem to be shrinking?

The reality is that the Internet is not going away and technology will continue to innovate. We can use technology for its many benefits, but we should also be aware of its potential to impact our state of mind in a negative way. If Patanjali or Shankaracharya were living today, they would undoubtedly make use of today’s amazing technology. At the same time, they would also instruct their students to turn off their cell phones and electronic devices from time to time in order to develop concentration and one-pointedness. The choice for us is clear: we can use technology or it will use us.

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