

## *Original Paper*

# Quieting the Monkey Mind. Enhancing Mindfulness Meditation by Incorporating the Cocktail Party Effect

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### **Abstract**

*Mindful meditation is bedeviled by the tendency of the meditators mind to wander away from concentrating on the breath, or other focus, and wandering to random subjects stimulated by memories and distractions. The underling goal of meditation training is to learn how to silence the incessant chatter of the unfocused mind, Poetically referred to as the monkey mind, to enable being in the moment.*

*The Cocktail Party Effect is a well studied, but little understood, higher level characteristic of the human acoustic system. It allows a conversation between two speakers to function in the presence of the overwhelmingly loud background noise of a cocktail party or noisy Bar.*

*Consciously incorporating the Cocktail Party Effect into a meditation practice can enhance the ability to silence the bedeviling monkey mind chatter.*

### **Keywords**

*Mindful Meditation, Cocktail Party Effect, Monkey Mind, Awareness, Attention*

### **Introduction**

Mindfulness meditation aims to cultivate the ability to experience moment to moment awareness of present events. In simpler terms, it can be understood as: ‘living in the moment’. It has been long recognized that cultivating Mindfulness through the practice of meditation leads to improvements in the experience and effectiveness of one’s life. “Mindfulness meditation is the conscious direction of attention to an object, person, idea or stimulus” (Divya Krishnakuma, Michael, & Shanmugamurthy, 2015; Tang, Britta, & Michael, 2015).

The Cocktail Party Effect allows a conversation between two speakers to be maintained in spite of a cacophony of babbling conversations surrounding the speakers.

The Cocktail Party Effect (Ngat, Linda, & Lukas, 2022) can give a potent assist to achieving an effective meditation practice when it is appropriately applied during meditation. This little understood mechanism of the human hearing sense can be used to help focus and maintain the attention of the meditator.

In many meditation disciplines the meditator is directed to focus her attention on the breath, the method most often used to accomplish this focus is to count the breaths. Each breath is counted from one to ten. Then the count is repeated.

The beginning meditators greatest problem is to maintain attention focused on the breath. During the actual counting, the attention is fixed on the count and on the breath. In the time between counts the mind is free to wander. The meditator is instructed to let go of these wandering thoughts as soon as they are noticed and return the attention to the breath. This difficulty in maintaining focus arises from the empty spaces between counts. When there is an empty space in the meditators attention the mind fills the space with thoughts driven by random memories or immediate distractions. Colloquially this is called the monkey mind. The monkey mind fills ones attention with a constant stream of chatter drawing the attention away from its goal of keeping the focus on the breath.

If instead of counting breaths the meditator listens attentively to the breath, the sound of breathing in and the sound of breathing out, the power of the cocktail party effect will kick in. It will lock in the meditators attention to the sound of the breathing just as if the sound of the breath was the voice of another person in a conversation in a noisy environment.

The inhalation and exhalation are kept at a relaxed normal rate with the conscious drawing out, or lengthening of the exhalation. The meditator is instructed to accompany the slow finish of the exhalation with the dropping of the awareness of the breath sound into silence. This silence is listened to as part of the breath cycle. There are, in effect, three phases to each breath cycle: 1) breathing in; 2) breathing out; and 3) quietly watching (listening to) the breath sound descend into silence as the exhale finishes.

In phase 1), breathing in sounds of the breath are listened to. If there a lot of interfering background noise and the breath cannot be heard, the breath sound can re-voiced with the inner voice, just as BBC reporter will re-voice a difficult to understand phone interview. In phase 2), breathing out sounds can be treated to the same re-voicing. In cycle 3), the silent phase the meditator listens to the silence until the body spontaneously initiates the next incoming breath.

In a conversation the listener directs her attention to the speaker when he is talking. When the speaker pauses, the listeners attention, with the help of the cocktail party effect, stays on the speaker ready to pick up the beginning of the next utterance. The pause in speaking is analogous to the third empty breathing phase. The cocktail party effect will keep the focus on the breathing in the quiet space between the exhalation in anticipation of the arrival of the next inspiration for a limited period of time.

There are two timing effects that limit the cocktail party effect. 1) it take 4 seconds from the start of listening before the cocktail party effect locks in. 2) when the speaker pauses with a silence of more

than 4 seconds the effect of focused attention will drop out (Arons, 1992).

The silent finish of the exhale must not exceed 4 seconds. However if the timing of the silent phase is not forced, the breath will spontaneously initiate the next inspiration in less than about 3 seconds.

During the silent phase the meditator will hear the silence even though there is a cacophony of sound in the background.

The background sounds play an important role. The cocktail party effect works best when there is a background sound level that is about the same as the level of the listened sound. If there no background sound, any sudden sound can grasp the meditators attention. Without a steady background, a dog barking or a door slamming can pull the meditators focus away from listening to the breath.

Anecdotally, an effective background was found to be the sound of rain or instrumental music.

The counting of breaths is a scaffold to help the novice order his breath in space and time. The price paid for this scaffold is that each call for a number wakes up the linguistic part (left brain) of the mind which then welcomes all (Stephanie, Nina, & Robert, 2016). The scaffold can be maintained without waking the linguistic part of the mind by simply counting with fingers instead of silently articulating numbers. Pinky is '1', Ring finger is '2' ...so on. Keep counting in this non linguistic way till you don't have to.

In a nutshell: listen to the breath instead of counting it in order to marshal the power of this well documented, but poorly understood, function of the human auditory system: the cocktail party effect.

The cocktail party effect is a naturally occurring expression of Artificial Intelligence. It operates on a mechanistic level different from normal human intelligence or awareness. Applying this natural AI to meditation is like using GPS to augment navigation while driving.

The Cocktail Party Effect can help the meditator achieve the goal expressed by Deepak Chopra: "In the midst of movement and chaos, Keep stillness inside of you" (FaceBook post by Deepak Copra from Dec 14, 2011).

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