R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, Derekh HaMelekh, Breishit, p. 5.

Our holy master (may his memory be a shield to us) began with a teaching of the sages: “A dream is one sixtieth of prophecy” (Talmud Bavli Berakhot 57b). The master continued with his well-known thesis that the ego constitutes a barrier to the heavenly influx. Thus, if one’s thoughts and intellects are awake, it is difficult for the heavenly flow to penetrate. However, when one sleeps, his knowing mind and thoughts are quiet, and precisely because at such times he has no self-directed consciousness it is possible for the heavenly influence to rest upon him. This is the meaning of “a dream is one sixtieth of prophecy.”

It is also well known from the teachings of our master that we are more spiritually aroused to a greater extent in prayer than in Torah study, for when we learn Torah, we tend to utilize our sense of self: “I learn…, I think that…” But in prayer it is just the opposite; the essence is the self-annihilation in it. Now when a person sleeps, it is impossible for him to desire anything for himself, since he is asleep. Thus the essence is, when it is possible, to come to a sleep-consciousness while we are awake. That is to say, we wish to quiet a person’s unceasing flow of thoughts and desires. For, it is the way of thoughts to become entangled, one in the next, and so it is difficult for a person to separate himself from them. (This is like what I merited to hear from our holy master on another occasion that if a person could observe the stream of his thought for only one day he would see that there is almost no distinction between himself and a madman. It is just that the madman actually acts upon his thoughts, but the thoughts themselves are indistinguishable.) He then gave concrete advice concerning how to quiet thought.

He said first that a person should watch his thoughts for a short while, that is, what he is thinking. He will slowly feel that the mind is emptying; his thoughts are slowing a bit from their habitual flow.

1 Yeshut, literally his beingness, his being something, in contrast to nothing, ayin.
2 Literally, no consciousness or thought of or for himself, no da’at leatsmo. That is, no self-consciousness.
3 Anokhiut, lit. “I”ness.
4 The italics indicate Yiddish in the original.

R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira was a Hasidic Rebbe, educator and spiritual innovator in early twentieth century Poland. He founded a major yeshivah, Das Moshe, and impacted many lives. He was a leader in the Warsaw Ghetto during WWII and was killed by the Nazis in 1943 at the age of 54.
Basic Mindfulness Practice

A. Sit comfortably on a chair or cushion with an easy upright spine and in a relaxed yet steady posture. Imagine sitting with a quiet dignity or soft strength, like a mountain.

B. Bring your attention to your breath, to the concrete physical sensation of your breath moving in and out of your body. You can observe this sensation by following the movement of the breath in and out of the body, the expansion and contraction of the chest or belly, or the tingling sensation at the tip of the nose as the breath moves in and out. Choose one way of paying attention to your breath and simply observe that sensation.

C. When your attention goes elsewhere note where you have been and gently but firmly return to the breath.

D. Repeat!

Questions for Discussion

• How does R. Shapira describe the ‘self’ or ego here? How is this ‘self’ (distinct from your sense of personality and uniqueness) problematic? Why does it block spiritual inspiration?

• How does the unceasing flow of thought and desire sometimes cause you problems?

• Notice that the problem here is not thought or desire themselves (both perfectly good things), but the way in which they hijack and take over the mind and heart. How might observing one’s thoughts and desires stop this hijacking process?