

100 Days of Meditation

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Background



From January 1st through April 10th of 2013 I participated in a [100-day meditation personal challenge](#) organized by members of the [/r/meditation subreddit](#). During this time I meditated 30-90 minutes per day and abstained from alcohol and coffee (although I did drink green tea.) Also, in the true spirit of monasticism, I did my best to keep celibacy. I kept an online journal in [this Google Group](#) which tracked assorted subjective data points on my “sits.”

I present the results here in attempt to bolster the already fairly well-known hypothesis that meditation has a unique and positive effect on mood, and also to put forth for discussion some other unusual results of my practice (see section: “[The Really Unexpected](#)”) Finally, I want to encourage anyone who is interested in meditation to [pick up a Zafu](#) and a blanket, and [give it a try](#). If this method worked for me, it can likely work for you as well.

Our Subject

I was born in 1981 and I live in the United States; I have a 9-to-5 job, I am of average height &

weight, and I exercise 1-3 times per week. I don't take drugs, smoke, or have any medical or psychological conditions. I have a wife, a degree, and I live in a small city apartment.

When I was first introduced to meditation, the concept didn't make any sense to me--I couldn't understand what kind of benefit "just sitting there" could bring you that couldn't be had in far greater form from, for example, napping. I began to investigate, but I found that a lot of the contemporary literature on meditation is glommed together with what is known as "new age" books, which tend to be composed of 99% nonsense--the kind that makes you genuinely concerned for the person who wrote it (not to mention whomever is publishing & purchasing it.)

At some point, however, I came across two authors who shed some light on the subject and also seemed to speak from the authenticity of their own experience, which rekindled my interest and made me think that perhaps there was more to it than I had previously realized. These two authors were the late [Gopi Krishna](#), and the contemporary author [J.J. Semple](#). Through books of Semple's and through his website, I discovered an old Chinese Taoist meditation manual, "[The Secret of the Golden Flower](#)", often described as "Zen with details" (pictured right & henceforth abbreviated as SGF), together which served to point me in a methodological direction.



The Method

Above all, I wanted to find a *clean* method--one as free from unscientific baggage as possible. [Zazen](#) seemed to afford this, so I took a free introductory class my [local Zen Center](#), which, while it didn't give me anything I couldn't have gained with a few online searches, helped me feel like I was at least adhering to some kind of acceptable standard. Taken together with SGF and Gopi Krishna's books, I felt I had a good starting point. After some time and adjustment I settled on a method that worked well for me; it is as follows:

- 1. Determine the best hour of the day for you to sit.** This is actually very important, as the timing of your sit can make or break it. Two requirements are important here:



1. It is impossible to meditate with a full stomach, so you should always meditate either *before* a meal, or long enough after one that you do not feel the effects of digestion on your heart rate.
2. It should be more than 4 to 6 hours after consuming any kind of heart-rate-altering chemical like alcohol, caffeine (including chocolate), sugar (although a little sugar is probably fine), nicotine, etc.

The reason for these two caveats is that your metabolism and heart rate are affected by digestion and even mild stimulants or depressants, to the point that you will not be able to manually slow down your metabolism, which in turn will prevent you from meditating properly. This can be tricky to fit into your schedule depending on whether you are a morning person or not.

This author is most certainly not a morning person, and tried several morning time slots without much luck before ultimately settling on the early evening hours shortly after coming home from work. In the morning I found I was simply too groggy to focus--I would start to fall back to sleep. I tried other times as well, and found out very quickly that sitting with a full stomach or when already tired is mostly a waste of time; you can't slow down your metabolism and you never enter the meditative state--in which case you actually would be better off napping!

Thus, 6 or 7pm pre-dinner ended up being the best time for me, although I found I had to eat a late-ish lunch in order to not be bothered by hunger. Drinking a small glass of milk or juice helped take the edge off.

2. Find a location that is as free from distractions as possible. In my case, this was my bedroom. Here, I could close the doors and windows, pull the shades, dim the lights, and apart from occasionally noisy neighbors, be more or less protected from unwanted distraction.



3. Find a sitting position in which you can be more or less comfortable for an hour. Reclining is generally a bad idea because your body associates it with going to sleep, and you will find it difficult to stay awake. Standing doesn't really work because you tend to need to shift on your legs occasionally in order to keep them from aching, and this means the best alternative is to sit. After trying to sit on a bed pillow, then two bed pillows, and finally a

couch seat-cushion, I caved in and bought a zafu, which worked remarkably well and elevated my legs high enough for them to be completely comfortable (after about a week of acclimation) during long sits. I also draped a quilt over my legs and feet which helped to keep them warm. Sitting in a chair is an option, and although I didn't try it personally, it seems possible that it might work as well if sitting cross-legged is uncomfortable for you.

4. Focus on your breathing. This is one of those things that people always tell you to do when meditating, but nobody ever really explains *why* it's so important. Well, it turns out that the reason is because when you're focusing on your breathing, it distracts your brain from generating other thoughts, and this helps still the mind. It's especially useful when you're just starting out, because initially, wrangling your mind into stillness is so challenging that it can seem futile at times--but by remembering to return your focus back to the regular, calming rising and falling of your breathing, your brain will eventually settle, though it may take a few sits to get there.

Position

With your back comfortably--but not forcibly--straightened, either close your eyes or lower them such that they are about the same angle as the tip of your nose (but don't actually look at the tip of your nose--this would make you cross-eyed.) Again it's only important inasmuch as it reduces the amount of incoming stimuli to your brain. For the first 60 days, I sat with eyes closed, which helped prevent distraction, but also made it easier to unconsciously slip into a daydream if I was not diligently focused. After about 60 days, it became easier to keep my eyes slightly open. You can probably do whatever works best for you.

Leg Style

Leg style is something people tend to get hung up on, but it's best to remember that the goal here is not to master asana poses, but to be able to sit comfortably for extended periods of time. This means it's okay if you are inflexible or weigh more than the average person--you can still meditate, you just need to find whatever zafu / chair / leg positions combination is most comfortable. Initially, I found that the most comfortable position was actually just the typically cross-legged "Indian-style", that most of us are familiar with, but this was only good for around 20 minutes or so, after which it put undue pressure on my ankles. After a few days I switched to "half-lotus" (pictured) which is the same thing as Indian style but with one leg (any leg) pulled up and over such that it rests on the opposite knee or thigh, or within



Right leg is on top



Left leg is on top

the space created by the kink in the knee.

I never “graduated” to full-lotus, nor do I think anyone needs to, unless they try it and find it’s comfortable. I’ve also never been very flexible, so do what works for you. Remember that the goal is comfort over long spans of time; you don’t need to overachieve.

5. Be patient while your back and leg muscles

acclimate to this new position. This will take a few sits, mainly because this is not a position people normally keep, so your lower back muscles will start to ache after 20 minutes or so, and your legs and knees may fall asleep or be uncomfortable.



Whenever you feel uncomfortable during a sit, it’s best to extend your legs or stand up / walk around if you need to. After a few sits you’ll be fully comfortable, it just takes a few days for your muscles and joints to adjust. If after a week or two on a zafu, your knees or ankles are still sore or your legs are falling asleep, try sitting in a chair rather than sitting cross legged. You could also try leaning against a bed or couch or some surface which will offer back support. Finally, if you haven’t got a zafu, [you really should get one](#)--the firmness of the zafu will give your legs a degree of comfort that can’t be found in a pillow or couch cushion. Your legs should never fall asleep--a friend of mine who did a 30-day sit complained even during the later days that his legs consistently fell asleep, and it turned out he had been sitting on a pillow. Do yourself a favor and buy a zafu early on.

6. Consciously stop your mind from following thoughts that it creates. This is the keystone of most meditative practice, and I found that while initially difficult, with even a small amount of practice it was quickly achievable. It’s difficulty is due to the fact that the mind inherently avoids stillness, so at first, the idea of “thinking about nothing” seems impossible--surely even the act of not thinking involves *some* thinking?

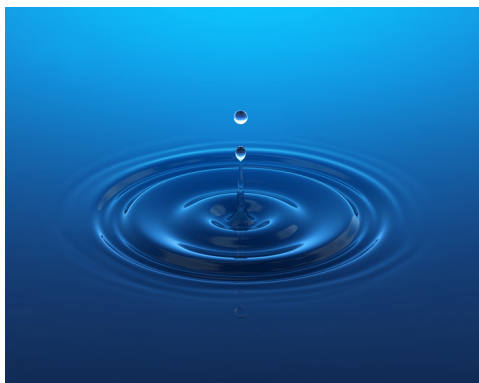


Fortunately there is no paradox and “not thinking,” I can assure you, is completely possible for any person, it only takes practice. The critical distinction I finally made was in recognizing the difference between *perceiving* thoughts, which is a passive process, versus *creating* them. They are typically very closely bound, such that every perceived thought creates new thoughts, and so on indefinitely, to the extent that even as we sleep, our brain is repeating this process in dreams. This draws one to the remarkable conclusion that outside of meditation, we might only experience a completely thoughtless state for a few brief moments in our entire lifetime. One of the best things about meditation is that once you get the hang of it you can experience that for as long as you like, and it is a truly remarkable experience.

A Unique State of Mind

The above struck me because it means that the state you reach in meditation really is a genuinely unique state of mind, and once I got to the deeper states, I realized how true this was. At those states you can clearly sense that you are in a different mental world, and you can persist there for as long as you like, at least until your legs get tired or, for example, your downstairs neighbors start vocally expressing their affections for one another...

What you'll notice as you persist is that your mind will come to rest very naturally *if*, for as long as 30 minutes, you don't follow the thoughts or feelings that will constantly be arising. Those 30 minutes will seem like 300, and it will typically start with a lot of "oops, I just realized I was daydreaming again" and "crap, I just reviewed an event from work in my head", until you remember to come back to your breathing-- this is the "hack" that will distract your mind from itself long enough for it to settle, and once it's settled, it's much, much easier for it to *stay* settled, but until you get there, it can be painfully hard. It's also not as gradual a process as one might imagine--it's a stair-step graph where for 25 minutes or longer you simply will not notice any change whatsoever, and then, suddenly, you'll notice that you're in a different mental space where your thoughts aren't center-stage.



The image that came to mind when I first got the hang of it was of the brain as a large jug of water. Your thoughts and feelings are like waves that travel through it, so when you think about something or submerge yourself in a feeling, you are creating more waves, and so on. This process is *very* subtle because your brain is sensitive even to the smallest of thoughts, so once you create one, the waves will bounce around your brain for several minutes until they settle. But, as soon as you stop creating new waves, just as the jug of water would very naturally settle and become calm, so too does your mind, except that while the jug would take only a few seconds to settle, your brain tends to take 30-45 minutes.



Amusingly enough, throughout the entire challenge during the initial 30-40 minutes I always thought to myself--even at the 100th day--“Ugh, it isn’t working this time... why I am I sitting here wasting my time?” and so on. But nevertheless, after the 30-45 minute mark, I would slip into what I began calling The Deep.

The Deep

The Deep is a point at which you realize that not only has your mind settled, but you’ve entered into another mental state entirely. From a physical perspective, it could be the point at which your brainwaves actually shift to a lower-frequency state--at least, that’s what it feels like. It’s hallmark is stillness--to the point where you feel as though you are suspended underwater. I didn’t always get there, and it took several weeks before I was even able to approach it, but before long, getting there became the goal of every sit. It made the experience rewarding and fascinating, because I sensed a progression; that I could go further.

Breathing and heart rate were key. I had to slow my breathing--never to the the point of discomfort, mind you--and by doing so, very gradually, my heart rate would also slow down. If I ate a heavy meal or was tired, it was impossible to do this, but when it worked it felt good on a deep level. Every time I came out of The Deep, I experienced, for lack of a better word, a blissful, tranquil euphoria that lasted several hours and was the principal benefit of practice.

Knowing that I can be in that state if I want to helps me deal with the stresses of everyday life.

7. Repeat. Adhering to the regimen and not “breaking the chain” was challenging, but rewarding. Knowing that I absolutely needed to be home between 6-7pm every day or I wouldn’t get my sit in put a framework around my day’s activities and motivated me to get work done. It also changed my social life, for better or for worse; for example, one thing I could no longer do was go out for happy hour drinks following work--or rather, the few times I tried to go to a bar and *not* drink made me feel like it wasn’t worth the effort. It was interesting to find that I really didn’t care for socializing unless I was drinking, and that drunk people can be really obnoxious to be around when you’re stone-sober. Furthermore, knowing that meditation would require a certain amount of energy, I found myself moderating my work level during the day, such that I didn’t end up completely worn-out.

Results & Observations

The Good

Meditation completely eliminated *all* (even trace) feelings of stress and anxiety after 30-40 minutes. This was one of the most significant observations of the challenge period, and it made an incredible measure of difference; one that I didn’t anticipate would be as effective as it was. Knowing that I have the ability to reliably remove all stress from my mind has made me glad I invested the time into learning the skill.



Meditation triggered spontaneous feelings of happiness, bliss (no, seriously--bliss), and tranquility for a period of 2-3 hours

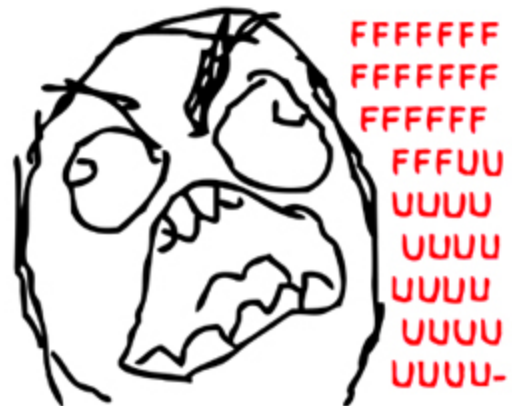
following a sit in The Deep. Every time I entered The Deep, after sitting I would get up and walk around in what I called “the force field.” Even when walking out onto the busy city streets, it felt like I had a bubble of protection around me; that nothing could touch me. I can’t emphasize enough how profound this feeling was; it wasn’t just regular happiness or contentment, it put me in touch with a deeper strata of emotional experience, the kind of which is only typically encountered perhaps in fleeting instants while watching a picturesque sunset, or the view from an airplane. This state persisted for hours at a time.

Happiness an Emergent Property of the Still Mind?

I was surprised to learn that in addition to the calming aspect of the sits, what emerged spontaneously was happiness. This result was interesting because it raised the question of how being calm and being happy are related--ie, whether this kind of happiness can simply emerge from being calm for a long enough period of time. In any case, it was a wonderful experience and, although it took me several weeks to first get there, made every sit a joy.

The Unexpected

Meditation did not help me control my stress much *outside* of the time of sitting. Aside from affording me a few hours inside the profoundly serene “force field” of the stilled mind, after I got up the next morning and arrived at the office, the stresses and tumult were still there, and I was still just as affected by the chaos of the city--a car horn would blare, or someone would say something aggravating, or a hobo on the bus would be yelling and screaming and my mental and emotional reactions were just as upsetting as they've always been.



Serenity Now?

It reminded me a bit of the of [this Seinfeld clip](#). If I were living or working in a more peaceful environment, or even if I'd been meditating in the morning, perhaps I would have been able to keep the good feelings going, but as it was, the bliss only lasted so long. Even still, knowing that I had even the *ability* to get to it made me feel like I at least had some defense against the stresses of everyday life--the city was less oppressive because now I knew I could escape.

Meditation made the external world seem a bit less important. This was a subtle effect, but also worth mentioning, and could be either be good or bad, depending on your responsibilities

and goals in life. The process of stilling your mind has the effect of returning you to a sort of “zero state”, which can actually be bad if, for example, there are pressing decisions that you need to make, or if there is something that you genuinely *should* be worried, upset, or frantic about. Putting my mind into neutral in this way meant that I occasionally had to remind myself that there really *was* a world outside of my meditative bubble that might need some attention. Occasionally I would find myself letting little things slip here & there, or not working as actively with my team at my job as I felt I could have.

It was not a huge effect, but it was noticeable. I should note that you can probably “tweak” the meditative practice such that you focus your thoughts on a particular thing rather than stilling them to the zero point. This would likely have the opposite effect, giving you *more* mental cycles to devote to your work or creative pursuits, however to me that wouldn’t qualify as meditation so much as it would be concentration.

The Really Unexpected

My forehead caught on “fire”. No--really.

This was the single strangest event of the entire challenge, and I have no explanation for it, but what took place was that after about 30 days, the center of my forehead felt like it was emitting or radiating what I can only describe a kind of heatless, lightless flame. I call it a flame because it produced--I sh*t you not--the distinct, *tactile* sensation of flickering like a candle over the surface of my forehead, to the point where when it first began, I *actually got up and looked for a window I thought I must have left open*.



I thought it was a fluke until it *never went away*, so after days, weeks, months and now years of increasing intensity and range of motion, I had to concede that it A) was not a headache or side-effect of, for example, withdrawing from caffeine or alcohol, and B) it was somehow related to the practice of meditation, as the more I meditated, the stronger it got. Beyond that, I can't speculate. It had zero other apparent effects, positive or negative, but persisted as a kind of weird “meditative exhaust pipe.” After around day 60, I felt it constantly, every second of every minute of every day, exactly in the middle of my forehead, pulsing in and out in an unobjectionable but utterly mystifying way.

It actually persists to this day, however, as I eased off on meditating after the challenge period was over, it is now not as strong and goes in and out of being of its own volition. It's easy to ignore and does not impair my focus or affect me in any way; it just sort of “is”. Still, it is

remarkable to me that it has persisted for what is now 9 months after I stopped meditating on a daily basis. The fact that Buddhist and Hindu iconography, both of which have centuries-old histories of meditative practice, show a dot or flame in the same region makes me think it is perhaps a common artifact of practice. I'd certainly like to investigate it further to see if any kind of measurements could be taken of it, whether topical or via EEG. (Does anyone with equipment want to measure my forehead? I'm serious! [Let me know!](#))

Celibacy was practically impossible. I probably shouldn't have been shocked by this finding, considering that sex is an evolutionary imperative and all, but it was humbling to find that it wasn't possible for me to give up completely. Instead, my repeated attempts to remain celibate for longer than two weeks was actually a harrowing experience which certainly gave me some insight into, for example, the difficulties the Catholic Church has had with the conduct of some of its priests--it simply did not seem healthy to resist this process 100%, and putting guilt on top of it can't be good for one's mental health, either. On the occasions when I did break celibacy, it was because the resistance was actually causing my entire mood and personality to morph me into an irascible, irritable beast, unable to focus, unable to enter a meditative state. Because of this, I can't recommend complete celibacy unless you find that it has no noticeable side effects.