

Five times a year, Acem Meditation eNews gives you an update on activities, publications and developments in Acem International School of Meditation. The eNews also brings articles on meditation for Acem meditators and others with an interest in meditation.

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Thought goblins and the longing for nirvana

by Øyvind Ellingsen, MD PhD

Do you remember your first meditation? The gratifying feeling of being calm, relaxed and restful. We bring it with us when we sit down to meditate – a longing for peace of mind and liberation from stress. No wonder the advertising industry uses the image of the meditating Buddha. Nirvana is not only global shorthand for inner peace and well-being; it is also the brand name of the perfect mattress. But when the longing for nirvana becomes too strong, we sometimes encounter the thought goblin...

Longing for nirvana

Who does not wish for a breather from stressful routines and incessant demands – a little everyday-life nirvana? You sit down, close your eyes and repeat the meditation sound. And then the miracle happens. The tightness in your shoulders relaxes, your breathing slows down, your thoughts flow almost imperceptibly by. After half an hour you open your eyes, take a deep breath and are – completely rested! Ready to meet the day with renewed energy. Experiences like this create an expectation that good meditation will produce a pleasant feeling. Often this is the case, but not always.



Thoughts are part of it

Recent research confirms that the natural resting state of the mind is not emptiness, but a tendency to wander – between episodes and impressions from the near and more distant past, self images, spontaneous reflections, creative impulses, daydreams and snippets of wishful thinking. In daily life, most of us hardly even notice this stream of consciousness; it passes by unnoticed in the background. But even in the absence of definitive scientific proof, it is likely that this mental activity has a function. Many believe that it is a mental digestion process. In the stream of thoughts during meditation and in night-time dreams, experiences and impulses that have not quite found their place are worked through. There are many indications that the brain needs time for recreation and reflection in order to function well under stress.

What produces peace of mind?

Acceptance is a central element in Acem Meditation and other methods with well-documented effects on stress management and health. Acem practitioners learn to repeat the meditation sound with a free mental attitude. The golden rule is to repeat the sound gently and without effort, and to allow thoughts and impressions to circulate freely, be they pleasant, neutral or unwelcome. This improves the mental digestion process, gradually releasing stress and tension, though this may take longer than a single session. By meditating in this way it is possible to achieve an inner balance even amid turmoil. Peace of mind is attained by cultivating acceptance and a free mental attitude. If we strive to achieve a particular state or to avoid uncomfortable thoughts, it becomes more difficult to relax and work through tension.

Thought goblins

Some times stressful thoughts arise during meditation, or we experience restlessness and bodily tension:

“I just can’t seem to relax, even when I meditate the whole half-hour. What has happened to the good feeling and the interesting thoughts? Am I just wasting my time?”

“I understand that it may take a while, because I’ve got quite a bit to handle right now. But that long?”

“Maybe I’m not doing it right? The meditation sound is pretty indistinct and keeps disappearing. I have to make sure that all of the syllables are there. That I repeat it properly. Dis-tinct-ly. DIS-TINCT-LY.”

“I feel something tightening up – in my neck and temples. Ten minutes left?!”

“Oh, I am just not doing this right. Maybe meditation doesn’t work for me?”

Doubts like these can be frustrating and demoralising. In meditation terminology, they are called *metathoughts* – negative evaluations of your meditation. Unnoticed, the thought goblin has snuck in. The thought goblin is an internal critic who puts a negative slant on the act of meditating, the meditator, or everything to do with meditation. And we tend to believe everything the thought goblin says. If the expectation that meditation will produce a pleasant

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feeling is not fulfilled, you automatically assume something is wrong. Restlessness and uneasiness do not fit with the idea of a free mental attitude, and you become a victim of a mental short circuit. The negative feeling from the stream of thoughts becomes the truth about your meditation.

Strive or give up

It isn't easy to banish the thought goblin. The feeling that things should be different – the longing for nirvana – obstructs acceptance of the spontaneous stream of thoughts. The main challenge is not in letting thoughts and impressions flow by: with a bit of experience and guidance we get used to allowing that to happen without interference. The challenge is the feeling that accompanies the thoughts – an underlying sense that something is wrong. Though not necessarily strong or clear, these misgivings may still draw us away from the free mental attitude. "I need to do more. Repeating the meditation sound gently is not enough."

The most common reaction to the thought goblin is to strive for a 'better' experience, for example by putting slightly more pressure on the meditation sound in the hope of avoiding trivial thoughts or relaxing more. Another reaction is to keep interrupting meditation for little breaks in which to follow a thought or daydream to its end before going back to the meditation sound: "Just have to wait a minute or two." Without our noticing it, the thought goblin leads us into a backwater. And sometimes the thought goblin fools us into reducing the meditation time, skipping a session or two, or giving up meditation for a while.

Back on track

In meditation, time and guidance are good tools for dealing with thought goblins and the longing for nirvana. It is often surprising how little is needed to bring our practice onto a more satisfactory track. A somewhat longer meditation session often gives us time to get through a period of restlessness and uneasiness. Talking about meditation and its challenges with an experienced meditation guide can be very useful and help to identify areas of difficulty and frustration. This is often the first step towards

greater acceptance, a freer mental attitude and enhanced benefits from meditation.

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Where can you direct friends who want to know more about Acem Meditation?

There is always Acem's own web site, acem.com. But now you can also refer them to the famous web-based encyclopedia Wikipedia, which features an informative article about the technique.

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Meditation reduces stress in the brain



by Svend Davanger, MD PhD

People have been meditating for thousands of years. During the last decade, researchers have obtained a better understanding of what goes on in the brain during meditation.

The impact of meditation on the meditator's heart rhythm, blood pressure and hormone level has been known for many years. Recent technological developments are beginning to provide answers about what goes on in the brain during meditation.

For the last 15 years or so, new ways of applying MRI have made it possible to register and observe activity in the brain while it is consciously used for various tasks, including meditation.

These recent developments in neurological research indicate that meditation may actually change parts of the brain's reactivity to stress.

Ego functions and the prefrontal cortex

Scientists have particularly studied an area in the front of the brain called the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with personal traits. Characteristic types of behaviour are based on functional patterns

in the prefrontal cortex. Research has shown that this is one of the areas of the brain that is typically activated during meditation.

Damage to the prefrontal cortex may change what psychologists call our ego functions, i.e., our ability to make decisions, regulate emotions, and to understand and control our attention, reactions and impulses. The prefrontal cortex does not directly determine what we do, but collects information, processes it, puts it together, and analyses it in order to facilitate decision-making. Meditation activates this area.

Alpha waves and theta waves

One way of measuring activity in the brain is by observing electrical brain waves. We distinguish between delta, theta, alpha, beta and gamma frequencies. None of the frequencies is peculiar to meditation, but we know that alpha frequency increases in the posterior parts of the brain during meditation, indicating that we use our senses less while we meditate. Furthermore, increased theta activity in frontal brain regions during meditation may be due to relaxation in areas associated with stress and emotions.

Theta waves seem to be strongest in the prefrontal cortex during meditation. So far we do not know much about what this actually means, but the finding is still significant. Since the brain governs our capacity for awareness and attention, meditation cannot be described as a passive, trance-like state. The brain remains active during meditation.

How the brain produces relaxation

We know that when we use our brain during meditation, blood pressure and heart rate decrease. An interesting question is which neural mechanisms allow our thoughts to influence heart rate. How can a cognitive activity like meditation make us more relaxed?

The answer may be found near the frontal midline of the brain, in the anterior cingulate cortex, a neural area associated with attention and emotions. This area influences the autonomous functions of our body, e.g., heart, lung and intestine activity. Japanese researchers have measured the brain's frequency (EEG) and the heart's frequency (EKG) during meditation. They have found that whenever meditation strengthens theta waves in the anterior cingulate cortex, changes occur in the heart rate that are typical of relaxation. It seems that by increasing theta waves in the anterior cingulate cortex meditation produces a relaxation in our heart function.

The brain wave patterns of meditation are different from those observed in sleep, where we switch between delta activity (in deep sleep phases) and theta activity. Meditation takes place while we are awake. This means we are able to exercise conscious control over our mental actions, which is not the case when we are asleep.

Training the brain

One important question is how meditation governs the brain. It is likely that within a few years research will have documented how the brain changes over time with regular meditation.

Early findings in this field were presented at a major recent brain conference in Washington, DC. According to this research, meditation seems to strengthen the cerebral cortex in areas involved in emotional control. This is in line with meditators' frequent reports of an increased capacity to cope calmly with emotional strain.

Several American researchers describe meditation as a complex training of the brain. Personally, however, I believe that meditation is most effective when practitioners do not experience it as difficult. Some research findings indicate that techniques performed without effort produce the best results and the deepest relaxation. If meditation is demanding, its greatest potential benefits may be lost. Practising meditation may be an important training activity for the brain, but it should be less arduous than physical exercise and training for competitive performance.

Svend Davanger, MD PhD, is Associate Professor at the University of Oslo and has been an Acem instructor since 1981. He is one of the editors of the book *Fighting Stress: Reviews of Meditation Research* (Oslo: Acem Publishing 2008) and has published popular articles on brain activity during stress and meditation. His main research publications are within neuroscience.

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