

# Meditation for the GFDL/AOS Community

## Personal reflections, pointers, and practice

29 July 2020

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Thanks to John Krasting, Pu Lin, and GFDLEA for organizing.

Meditation can happen anywhere and anytime!



Coronation Island, Scotia Sea, April 2017



AGU Ocean Sciences “Meditation for Scientists” Workshop, Feb 2020. ~200 attendees. Led by J. Lilly and S. Griffies,

# Some qualifiers + caveats for this talk

- ❖ It is not about religion, though most religious traditions teach relaxation, contemplation, and meditation practices.
- ❖ It is not a sales pitch, though you might find my passion appearing as an attempt to convert the skeptic.
- ❖ This talk conveys some personal meditation practices and shares pointers for those in the broader GFDL/AOS community interested in testing the waters.
- ❖ I am not an expert, though I have taught meditation and have practiced (on and off) for many years.
- ❖ Caveat: Meditation is not a substitute for prescribed medical needs. Although some trained medical and psychiatric practitioners find that meditation supports certain patients, meditation is not a magic bullet. Furthermore, patience, persistence, and discipline are needed.

# On research and the creative process

When my mind is filled with this hodge-podge to the point where I cannot grasp it all at once, then I do a very curious thing. I try to defocus my mind, to deliberately lose it all, to melt the fragments of ideas into something akin to a hallucinatory vision.

In effect I try to raise the conceptual temperature to some equilibrium value where structure disappears for a few days, and then try lowering it to see what crystallizes out. It takes a lot of nervous energy, and sounds a bit mystical, but I can explain it in no other way.

It often happens that the crystals first formed do not fit together logically, so I try to try again, nearly weeping with frustration. Eventually crystals that do fit logically and have some relation to nature do emerge from the melt. And one wonders why no one ever thought of the idea before.

Henry Stommel, Collected Works, Volume I, page 10

# Some assumptions

- ❖ Folks in the GFDL and AOS community tend to have:
  - Analytical minds with keen attention skills;
  - Respect for empirical information;
  - The will to get things done.
- ❖ We are guided by empirical evidence in our research. Often that empirical method translates into personal choices.
- ❖ Many of us are busy.
  - Each day has tasks and duties for personal, family, & work.
  - Yet we have a will that allows us to set priorities.
- ❖ Increased evidence-based studies support the role of a daily meditation practice as a part of healthy lifestyles.
  - Reduce stress + anxiety; improve emotional intelligence; increase immune system strength; enhance relaxation, concentration, attention, memory, peace.



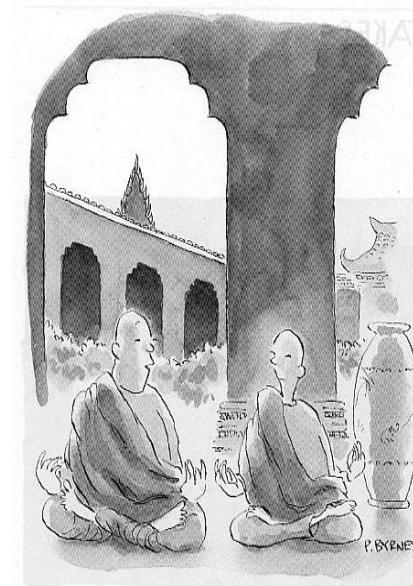
# Many meditation methods/styles/traditions

- ❖ **Vipassana** (insight) & **Mindfulness** (awareness)
- ❖ **Contemplative**: non-rational koans, rational reflections, contemplative prayer
- ❖ **Movement**: hatha yoga, walking, whirling, swimming, surfing, snow skiing
- ❖ **Breath/Mantra/Chant**: concentration, attention, surrender
- ❖ **Metta/Loving-Kindness**: compassion, empathy
- ❖ **Traditions**: religious + non-religious, western + eastern



# Some reasons why meditation is in my life

- ❖ Stretches mind by stilling mind fluctuations ("squirrel/monkey mind").
  - Yoga for the mind.
- ❖ Broadens perspectives + awareness to loosen our attachment to thoughts.
  - Lends appreciation that the mind is more than what it thinks.
  - Especially useful for those moments when thoughts deflate us.
- ❖ Complements the thinking-mind by nurturing space for insight.
  - See the quote from Stommel.
- ❖ Fosters awareness of how things are rather than how we think they are.
  - One product of mindfulness.
  - A great skill for scientists and engineers.
- ❖ Supports systematic investigations into our subjective nature (self-inquiry).
  - "Who am I ?"    "What is my true nature ?"
- ❖ Stress = Viscosity \* Strain
  - Strains arise from many sources, some internal and some external.
  - Stress debilitates and can greatly reduce life quality and life extent.
  - Meditation can help to reduce our viscosity so strains are less readily converted to stress.
  - Lower viscosity allows us to more readily "go with the flow".



Are you not thinking  
what I'm not thinking?

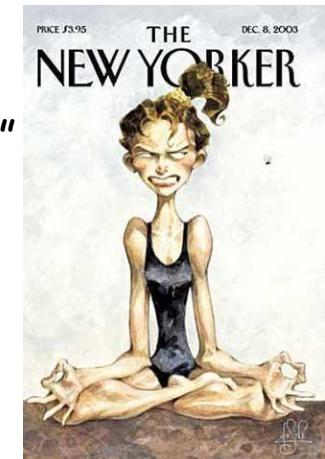
# Elements of my personal meditation practice

- ❖ Daily practice:
  - Mind & body need training to open up to stillness.
  - Meditation becomes more natural with practice, just like any other discipline.
  - At each stage there are new challenges and experiences.
  - Dedication and intention are important, but so is release and letting go: the ultimate in "passive activity".
- ❖ Early morning before the mind is overly engaged in activities:
  - Before eating and before email and before the NY Times.
  - A special time of the day for stillness, reflection, insight, inward gazing, mind cleansing.
  - Daily practice builds a routine, commitment, dedication, even if very short.
- ❖ Seated posture (hips higher than knees) with crossed legs to keep body balanced & aligned.
  - Essential not to fight gravity, particularly for long sits.
- ❖ Group meditation & meditation teachers can be very useful.
  - I have worked with a handful of teachers and meditated with various groups.



# Meditation practice: some general pointers

- ❖ Start with modest goals
  - Even 5 minutes or less, then build up to longer times if that suits your goals.
  - Maintain your intention to sit for a given period. It takes discipline.
- ❖ Be comfortable and stable in your posture
  - Seated w/ hips higher than knees: body aligned so you work with, not against, gravity.
  - Chairs are fine but keep feet flat on floor and back upright and not resting on the chair.
  - Many like to sit on a pillow with legs crossed. But that takes practice!
  - Laying flat often leads to sleep.
  - If you are physically unable to sit, then try walking or standing...
- ❖ Judgements can arise: "I'm no good at this!" "Total waste of time!"
  - Patience + persistence lead to deepening the practice.
  - It is called meditation **practice** after all!
- ❖ Group meditation + meditation teachers can be useful.
  - Books + videos to satisfy your intellectual curiosity and to learn methods.
  - Possibly seek teachers, groups, retreats that fit with your priorities.
  - Group meditation motivates and inspires one to deepen the practice.
  - Be mindful of situations that pose an inaccurate fit to your priorities.
- ❖ Anytime is a good time to add a meditative element to all of life's activities.



# Selection of books and gear

- ❖ Posture of Meditation: details of meditation mechanics; how to sit!
- ❖ Insight Meditation Workbook: step-by-step course for beginners
- ❖ The Mind Illuminated: Exhaustive manual for an array of meditation stages & styles from the perspective of a meditating neuroscientist.
- ❖ Why Buddhism is True: psychological perspective on meditation (former Princeton Uni psychology professor).
- ❖ Altered Traits: evidence-based research on how meditation changes (and generally helps) the mind; the field is rapidly evolving.
- ❖ Mindfulness in Plain English: just as the title says!
- ❖ The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration, and Meditation: A mental fitness manual with many guided meditations.
- ❖ Dharmacrafts: meditation gear (e.g., cushions)



# Preparing for a meditation session

From "The Mind Illuminated"

- ❖ **Motivation:** Why am I doing this? Be honest and non-judgmental. Who benefits from my being more calm and at ease?
- ❖ **Goals:** What are you working on during this session? Keep it simple, such as "I will not get annoyed when my mind wanders."
- ❖ **Expectations:** Be aware of how expectations can become a barrier to letting things naturally happen. There is no such thing as a "bad" meditation.
- ❖ **Diligence:** Resolve to practice for the entire session, whatever the duration.
- ❖ **Distractions:** Minimize potential distractions and hindrances. Reduce the obvious ones (e.g., phone, computer, noise, thirst). Acknowledge any thoughts or emotions that might become a distraction and set them aside so they do not dominate your mind.
- ❖ **Posture:** Review your posture; aim to be like clay--solid and stable while remaining pliant.



# A guided meditation ("Flow Sequence")

from "The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration, and Meditation"

**Access:** Pause. Become aware of your surroundings. Feel where your body touches the world. Bring your awareness to the weight and warmth where your body touches your own body. As you breath, exhale long and slow, softly sigh as though releasing a heavy load. Let go into gravity. Allow the inhalation to come naturally, effortlessly receive the breath. Scan your body for signs of tensions. Breath your awareness into those regions. As you exhale, soften and open around the tension. Smile to yourself. Gently remind yourself: "I do not need to hold this in my body."

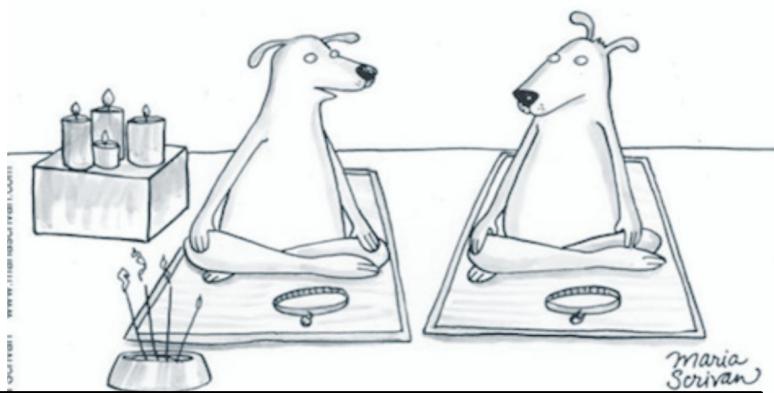
After scanning and releasing throughout your whole body, allow all sensations to flow within the space of your awareness; experience the symphony of life resonating within your body. Remember: there is space for all sensations within your experience. If tension or pain still remain, soften around it. Allow the sensations to float freely and to change without resistance. Gently bring your awareness to the flow of thoughts, feeling, and images in your mind. Simply notice (without commentary) how they change from moment to moment. Attend to the process of change without concern for the particular content of the thoughts and images. If you notice your attention tightening around any thought, feeling, image, or sensation, simply notice the gripping, smile to yourself, breath into it, and let it flow.

**Appreciation:** Now, simply rest in the flow. Remember--there is space for everything within your experience. Resistance is pain. Trust gravity. Relax into the flow. Allow your awareness to become subtler with each breath. Appreciate the resonant quality of the flow state. Practice fine-tuning and returning to this resonant flow state.

**Reentry and expression:** Once again, become aware of your contact with the world around you. With eyes closed, sense the space around you. Sense how the surrounding space connects you to everything. Experience the sounds, smells, and feelings filling this space. As your eyes gently open, allow them to be soft and receptive. See without looking. Aware of breath. Aware of gravity. Aware of the resonance. Aware of free flowing life within you. Carry the calm vitality of this experience into action.



# Many thanks!



The key to meditation is learning to stay.

The greatest thing of all education is to make the nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.

William James (1842-1910), American psychologist and philosopher

The function of meditation is to shine the light of awareness on our thinking. It is not that we should not have thoughts, but rather that we train not to get lost in them.

Joseph Goldstein, meditation teacher.