

Keeping the Zzzz's Out of Meditation

The temptation to doze off when you're meditating can be overwhelming at times. Need some help? These smart tips from a seasoned practitioner will keep you focused and alert.

By Rolf Sovik

Have you ever reached a quiet moment in your meditation only to find yourself falling asleep? Virtually all of us have dozed off during our practice at some point. The boundary between sleep and meditation is easy to cross—and once traversed, heads bob, spines wobble, and minds wander through personal wonderlands.

Handling the sleepiness in our heads can be a challenging task—made more difficult by the hold that sleep has over us. Sleep's power is that it satisfies our need for genuine mental downtime. It helps us forget ourselves and leaves us refreshed. "Oh sleep! It is a gentle thing, / Beloved from pole to pole," writes Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Nonetheless, sleep is the meditative distraction par excellence. It steals us away just as the most tranquil moments of meditation are unfolding. How do experienced meditators manage it?

Swami Rama, the meditation teacher who founded the Himalayan Institute, often reminded students that when a fool falls asleep, he wakes up a fool; but when a fool reaches the heights of meditation, he is transformed. Swami Rama's point was that meditation is an elevation of consciousness, not a diminution of it. He wanted students to be clear that the intention of meditation is self-transformation, not sleep.

While most of us know that sleeping is not meditation, that doesn't seem to prevent us from drifting off when the urge arises. Once triggered, the compulsion to sleep can be extraordinarily powerful. What's more, a wide range of factors influences it. A full stomach, congested bowels, lack of movement, lack of fresh air, sleep deprivation, and periods of emotional stress all can contribute to feelings of drowsiness. Managing sleepiness, it turns out, requires our full attention.

Developing a Meditative Perspective

Meditation allows us to explore the encounter with sleep in detail. In meditation we observe the subtle shifting of consciousness. More important, according to the sage Patanjali, we gain a measure of control over it. The aspiration of every meditator is to gain mastery over the fluctuations of the mind. This is accomplished through relaxed concentration—the conscious settling of the mind in a resting place—and by gaining inner distance and detachment from the passing activities and objects of experience.

The great problem with sleepiness is that it makes it difficult or even impossible to concentrate. It is, itself, one of those objects of experience passing through the mind. Just as the mind is about to rest and focus, sleepiness slides in. It magically erases the object of concentration (most often the breath or a mantra) and replaces it first with some rather strange and dreamlike images (hypnagogic imagery) and then with a vague feeling of nothingness. Dreamless sleep doesn't completely shut operations down, but it comes close. It immobilizes the body and involuntarily rests the senses and mind.

If we follow Patanjali's advice, we'll need to treat dreamless sleep as a *vritti*, one of the operations of the mind that must be controlled. That means recognizing the symptoms of sleep and choosing not to let them overwhelm us.

In sleep, the mind abandons all other conscious functions and dwells on the experience of nothingness. The qualities of dullness, stupor, and inertness (collectively known as tamasic qualities in Sanskrit) dominate us during sleep. As they approach, the mind perceives them and, like the memory of other pleasures, resorts to experiencing them again. For a time, the body/mind embodies *tamas*.

But like other operations of the mind, sleep is a distraction during meditation. Difficult as it is, our job as meditators is to recognize and observe our sleepiness, but not to embrace it. If we treat it like other distracting thoughts, the mind will let it go and gradually return to an alert, concentrated state. Sleepiness, like other thoughts, feelings, and sensations, is a passing wave. In meditation we are learning to ride that wave without letting it crash over us. This is the fundamental strategy for working with sleep in meditation.

Pre-Meditation Tips

The power of sleep, unfortunately, is real, and easily magnified. The commitment to step back from the brink of slumber requires the ability to recognize and manage factors that foster sleepiness. For example, if you have just eaten before sitting down to meditate you can count on at least 45 minutes of lethargy. That doesn't mean that you can't meditate during that time, but you won't be anywhere near your sharpest while your energy is being funneled into digestion rather than concentration. This explains why meditation manuals advise waiting two to four hours after a full meal before meditating.

The way you select and prepare food also dramatically affects the clarity of your consciousness. Food requires heat for digestion, and if you have not supplied that heat through a cooking process, you will have to draw it from your own body. Although individual constitutions vary enormously, too much raw food, particularly high-fiber greens, raw nuts and seeds, and dried fruits with an abundance of concentrated sugars, can sap energy rather than supplying it. Fatty foods require extra time to digest as well.

Inadequately cooked foods are yet another problem, as are foods that are stale, heavy, overcooked, or loaded with sugar. The outcome of overindulging in these foods will be an overwhelming sense of lethargy and a fuzzy mind.

Food is not the only factor that thickens the mantle of sleepiness. Lack of sleep is a major contributor, too. The trick is to get to bed early enough to provide adequate rest. Bedtime is generally under our control, but rising times often are not. It makes sense, then, to work on getting to bed on time, because a sleep-deprived mind will inevitably look for opportunities to catch some zzzz's during the day. And since meditation is undoubtedly the best moment it will find, if you do not manage your bedtime you can anticipate trouble ahead when you sit.

There are many other factors that increase the urge to sleep. To manage them, we need to wring out the *tamas* in our systems in one way or another. That can mean purposefully getting more exercise, bringing order to the clutter that surrounds us in our meditation room, opening a window to let in some fresh air, or cutting back on stimulants, such as coffee, that rebound when their effects wear off.

The Hub of Concentration

Sleeping in meditation is a powerful sign of lethargy and fatigue. It signals that we need to watch the way we are handling our energy levels. *Tamasic* impulses need to be managed over the long run, and when fatigue or lethargy alerts us to an imbalance, it's important to give it our attention.

In the end, sometimes the best way to manage sleepiness is simply to sleep. A 10-minute nap after lunch, or an occasional early bedtime, may be just what your meditation needs. It can soothe the otherwise irresistible pressure to nod off.

Finally, you can take the edge off the *tamas* while you meditate—not by resisting it but by cautiously approaching and accepting it. During meditation, a deep sense of stillness combined with relaxed breathing will partially satisfy your need for sleep. That doesn't mean using meditation as a recurrent chance to doze. The key to feeling more refreshed is to make your breath the hub of concentration. Breath awareness—focused attention on the flow of the breath—makes it possible to meditate while simultaneously resting. Using breath awareness, you can deeply relax your body, nervous system, and mind.

One of the most powerful and pleasant methods for doing that is to combine the rhythms of breathing with the mantra *soham* (pronounced *so-hum*). As you feel the movements of your breathing, inhale as you mentally say the sound *so*, and exhale as you mentally say the sound *hum*. Let the sounds flow smoothly and easily in your mind, merged with the natural pace of your breathing.

Swami Rama sometimes said that like the glowing ember of a fire that is concealed by layers of ashes, a sleeper—your own being—waits within. As you recite the sounds *so* and *hum* in your mind, he said, imagine that they are ever so lightly blowing away the ashes of *tamas* and little by little uncovering this Spirit in you. As you continue, be patient with the urge to sleep and allow time for it to pass. Let the *so-hum* mantra fill you, giving your body and mind a thorough rest. Remain in the quiet center of your awareness, and, without raising your inner voice, let the presence of the mantra gradually dispel your fatigue. But if your head starts bobbing, then put “restoration of energy” at the top of your to-do list. Bedtime is fast approaching.+

7 Steps to a snooze-free meditation

You can manage the urge to sleep with the practice of breath awareness.

- 1. Sit comfortably erect.** Use a chair or a wall to support your spine if helpful.
- 2. Close your eyes** and begin to follow the movements of your breathing. Stay with the breath for a few minutes, until your focus is steady.
- 3. Without losing your breath awareness,** relax your body just as if you were settling it into bed.
- 4. Continue to follow your breath,** maintaining your breath awareness as if it is virtually the only thing of importance in the universe.
- 5. Relax your mental effort.** Maintain a steady hold on your breath, yet relax your body and mind.
- 6. Now begin to silently recite the mantra so-hum.** Let that sound flow with each breath—so on the inhalation and hum on the exhalation. Sense that these sounds are gently blowing away layers of ashes that cover the embers of consciousness in you.
- 7. Continue for as long as you like.** The urge to sleep may come and go, but do not let it dislodge your relaxed breath awareness. Gradually, as you become more rested, your sleepiness will diminish or even disappear. Over a number of sessions you can lengthen the time you sit.

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