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# Finding escape from daily grind in meditation



MICHELE MCDONALD FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Leo March meditated in a class at the Arlington Center in Arlington.**

**By Kara Baskin** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 13, 2015

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It's noon on a dreary winter Friday at the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Mass. General Hospital. Cars spray pedestrians with filthy slush. Sirens squeal, horns screech, people jostle one another on the narrow sidewalks without bothering to look up.

But peace and enlightenment may be at hand.



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**Liz Donohue at the Arlington Center.**

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I'm perched on a chair in the office of Dr. Herbert Benson, a twinkly eyed cardiologist who exudes pure beatitude and who has agreed to walk me through the basics of meditation. Benson, 79, is director emeritus of the institute that bears his name. He is the sultan of de-stressing, a pioneer in mind-body medicine and one of the first physicians to link stress with physical health.

Now, with a compassionate gaze, he urges me to set down my bag, close my eyes for five minutes, and focus on a word of my choosing. "Now, what word resonates with you? Peace?" he purrs silkily, clasping his hands atop his desk. All I can think of is "nachos." I suppress my instinct to discuss snacks and instead opt for the word "calm," which feels like a safe choice. I sit up straighter and pretend I'm on a beach in Bermuda. "Now close your eyes," he smiles. "Calm."

I'm trying to relax, but all I can think of is Jeff Goldblum's famous bell-bottomed cameo in the Swinging '70s party scene of "Annie Hall" where he forgets his mantra. Giving myself over to stillness on a busy weekday feels as naughty as a hotel room tryst and incredibly awkward. The more I try to think of the word "calm," the more my mind races. "Stop that," I reprimand myself. "Focus. This nice man is watching you!" As instructed, I try to breathe — calmly.

I shouldn't worry; Benson has seen it all. As a cardiologist at Harvard University in the late 1960s, he found that meditation reduced metabolism, breathing, heart rate, and brain activity. He called these changes the relaxation response, which became the title of his best-selling book. Since then interest and acceptance of the physical and emotional benefits of meditation, which is one way to elicit the relaxation response, has grown. Today mindfulness techniques help patients cope with cancer, high blood pressure, or just the everyday strains of modern life.

So here I am, breathing purposefully and meaningfully, trying to suppress the nagging fear that I've parked my car in a tow zone. Sitting still runs counter to the modern human experience, and it definitely runs counter to mine. Even now, away from my laptop, phone, and other shackles, I'm still sorting through responsibilities. Did I call so-and-so back? Why didn't I send that e-mail? Can I pay off my credit-card bill? Am I getting a cold? Needling thoughts come and go like subway cars racing through a darkened station. Enlightenment, where are you? And where is my car?

After five minutes are up, Benson quietly implores me to open my eyes. I do, trying my best to telegraph a sense of proper serenity. He smiles.

"You look much younger," he says. "Your face is more relaxed. Your posture is more relaxed." That's funny; I feel like I've just run a marathon. Maybe he's simply being kind. Or maybe this relaxation stuff is so powerful that even attempting it makes a difference.

"Are intrusive thoughts normal?" I wonder, eager to get a good grade. He smiles benignly. Yes, of course. Everyone has them. The trick, it seems, is to let them float on by without trying to banish them.

The desire to achieve this peacefulness seems like it's everywhere lately. There are smartphone apps like Headspace and Calm to help people detach. Meditation in particular has been hailed as a path toward better health, fuller sleep, bolstered productivity. Once the provenance of New Age retreats, now there are meditation-based networking events for entrepreneurs.

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*I retreat into my own head for a few minutes, eyes closed, breathing meaningfully, while the day's potential stressors simmer just beyond my consciousness. If my worries go untended, even for 20 minutes, will they grow like weeds?*



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**Lisa Fredman meditates in a class at the Arlington Center.**

Clearly, people are desperate for escape. “We live in the most stressful modern world that’s ever been experienced,” says Benson, who established the Benson-Henry Institute in 2006 with the support of Globe owner John Henry. Today, he says, over 60 percent of doctor visits are in the mind-body stress-related realm, from heart attacks to infertility.

The beauty is that the benefits aren’t restricted to a Zen-blessed few. The two basic steps are the repetition of a sound, word, phrase, movement, or prayer, and the setting aside of intruding thoughts. This needn’t be done cross-legged in a candlelit room, inhaling incense. Yoga, jogging, praying — they’re all fair game. The primary goal is to break the train of everyday thinking, ideally each day for about 10 or 20 minutes.

This is not simple. Over the next several days, I attempt to meditate on my own. I usually do this first thing in the morning (his recommendation), sitting on the edge of my bed. It’s hard. I really want to grope for my iPhone and face the onslaught of social media and work — but instead I retreat into my own head for a few minutes, eyes

closed, breathing meaningfully, while the day's potential stressors simmer just beyond my consciousness. If my worries go untended, even for 20 minutes, will they grow like weeds?

What I discover is that the courage to give oneself over is almost as important as the act itself. Prioritizing the self over distractions is its own exercise and gratification. Not only do I start to feel as if I have control over my time, which is empowering, it's reassuring to return to reality and realize that nothing horrible has happened. Worries actually don't grow if left unwatched. It's comforting.

I say this with the arrogance of a week's practice. During my first solo outings, I felt as though I'd invited all my gruesome fears to a cocktail party and needed to politely entertain each one. "Looming deadline? Yes, hello! How have you been? You'll be handled by 5 p.m. No problem! Just one minute, I think I see my mortgage statement behind you, looking for some clam dip!" Then I'd open my eyes and rush to check my messages.

I felt as if I'd failed, but in Benson's world, there's no such thing. He even anticipates this anxiety. On his website, he reassures: "Do not worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation . . . maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace."

But I'm only human, so of course I want to know whether I'm doing it right. Eager for validation, I call Brenda Rogers, who leads meditation groups throughout metro Boston. Rogers calls it the practice of bringing attention to one object, like breath, in order to calm the mind.

"Don't get discouraged," she reassures me. "Everyone's mind is like a drunken bumble bee." Over time, it becomes more natural to accept and shrug off needling thoughts.

More and more, I'm treating these pesky party guests like specimens in a case — latent worries to be inspected, observed, and passively acknowledged. The relaxation response is becoming a way to take mental stock with some measure of remove, as though I'm a bystander in my own mind.

Now, this sensation is beginning to build on itself. More than a week in, I find myself actually looking forward to taking a break, instead of feeling like an unfaithful spouse, cheating on my daily routine. With this permission, it's actually somewhat interesting to

sit quietly and see which pesky thoughts bubble to the surface without feeling tethered to them.

“Meditation gives us the opportunity to observe how repetitive and automatic much of our thinking is,” Rogers tells me. By going deeper within ourselves, we can become bigger than our thoughts alone. In the middle of a busy workweek, an escape from the mundane is just a few deep breaths away. It’s a pretty calming thought.

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