

My personal experiences with the practice of meditation

By Ken Long



In a recent IITM weekly e-mail, Marjory gave a powerful example of the effect that meditation can have on the performance of your investment system, and your personal life. Even without a great deal of experience, the practice of meditation can have profound positive impacts in many dimensions of your life. Her personal story motivated me to share some of my own insights with meditation and how it has helped me. I am coming from a perspective of an informed layman, an active practitioner who has adapted and developed the practice of meditation for my own use, making no claims for expertise or assertions of efficacy for anyone else. If there's anything Van's teachings have helped me with, though, it's a willingness to maintain an open mind, to sample and test the world around me, to shift paradigms to develop a better understanding of myself and the world, and to share things of value with others, which invariably enriches me through feedback. And so in that spirit of cooperation and sharing, here are some things I've learned along the way.

Although the word "meditation" often conjures up the image of an Asian mystical guru, in an exotic setting, with chanting and ritual, I will strip away the cultural contexts that enfold the practice and summarize the main points that I have found common in a variety of disciplines ranging from Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Transcendental Meditation and philosophy, and describe where I see its positive effects in my own life.

The practice of meditation affects me in a number of domains. It also has affected me at different levels, some of which occurred quickly and some which took more time to manifest.

(1) Self discipline and commitment: like any new behavior, whether it be an exercise regimen, a diet, a professional reading program, a hobby, I found that in the beginning I had to make a conscious effort to conduct the practice. After I began to see positive results, I wanted to move this behavior from the realm of conscious intention to the realm of ingrained, unconscious habit or "unconscious competence". My technique was to schedule time daily linked in conjunction with other positive behaviors like exercise, and to keep track of my efforts in my logbook. After convincing my status quo part that this was a useful and valuable addition I found it easier and easier to maintain the behavior, and it became a habit. In practice, this means 20 minutes, a couple times a day that I dedicate (an important choice of words) to the maintenance of inner health, harmony and balance. Like any other positive behavior that becomes a habit, I found that the action of choosing to do this, and sticking to it daily, even when I am tired or not in the mood, reinforces and strengthens my self discipline and ability to commit to my values. I find the act of recording keeps me honest and accountable, even when it takes the form of checking a block on my monthly performance log. Since the meditation practice is a habit that concerns itself with mental activity and discipline, the reinforcement is even more compelling and dramatic. This self discipline and ability to commit to values has a positive carry over effect into the areas of my life in the same way that a regular exercise program has positive benefits in my life not directly related to working out: like stress management, inner harmony, attitude and general health

(2) Focus and concentration: in the same way that exercise develops more capacity in the targeted muscle group, the practice of meditation, dealing with an inwardly focused mental effort, improves my ability to concentrate and focus on whatever the task at hand has my attention. The ability to focus and concentrate makes learning easier and more efficient, and improves my work and play skills. I have found that the occasional use of guided meditation tapes helps me keep the practice fresh and interesting and valuable.

(3) Development of greater insight: generally speaking, beginning meditation practices deal with learning how to "sit quietly and do nothing", to learn how to let go of the preoccupation of the constant inner noise associated with the loud stream of modern consciousness. You learn how to develop a place of inner quiet and contemplation that is aware of the ebb and flow of life around you without becoming caught up in the chase. This often takes the form of learning how to not fight the natural drifting of attention, the relapse into inner talk, and returning to the quiet place without judging yourself harshly for having drifted. You learn to acknowledge where you are and what you discovered yourself doing and then return to the state of quiet calm. Mantras, or the repetition of sounds, with either the inner or outer voice, which may or may not have additional meanings beyond the physical vibration, can help the beginner rapidly get into this state of quiet thought until it becomes second nature. It is definitely a learned and learnable skill. The next step in meditation then is to take advantage of this quiet, nonjudgmental reflective state to begin the examination of self and behavior, which leads to insight. The combination of attention to detail and the calm, nonjudgmental reflective state support the development of insight into one's self and behavior when combined with honesty and integrity. I like to envision this process as peeling back the layers of the onion as I take a behavior I want to explore and follow it back through the chain of causality and intended action to discover just what it is that generates my behaviors. I can then take a look at those triggers and the outcomes of my actions and determine if these are consistent with my stated values and decide where I want to go with my self work. In the same way that a microscope is a tool that enables a scientist to look deeply into domains inaccessible to the naked eye, I think of meditation as a tool that helps me reveal my deeper inner workings to myself. This practice then can lead to wisdom and purification, evidence of which I try to find in my life.

(4)The manifestation of loving kindness: while I value the inner work that meditation brings about, I discover that when I get up from the practice and go on to the next thing that I can bring those qualities of calmness, focus, reflection and insight, and the validation of my values into the rest of my life. I find my outward directed actions tend to be more in alignment with my inner stated goals; I am more consistent. I find myself looking for opportunities to add value in whatever it is I am doing. I am better able to deal with challenges that come from ego and possession and so forth. After all, at some point you have to get up out of the chair or off the floor or out of the lotus position (it hurts my ankles).

One of my favorite exercises in the Infinite Wealth is the short meditation exercise we do. Picture 40 people like us in a conference room, among strangers for the most part, having traveled thousands of miles, who have carved precious nonrefundable time out of our lives to learn specific behaviors, techniques attitudes and habits that will lead to Infinite Wealth. We brought pens, pencils, PDAs. We have specific objectives in mind when we arrive. We want to get down to it and learn! And there we are, sitting quietly, doing nothing, and watching/listening, herding our thoughts in silence with eyes closed. You can almost hear the conventional inner voices shouting "Hey! I am paying good money to learn some things here that will add to my bottom line! Lets get on with it and do something!". And yet it is precisely the ability to sit quietly and do nothing, to relax and go within, to live the examined life when that's the right thing to do that can lead to breakthroughs and paradigm shifts that make the reality of Infinite Wealth possible!

Another good side effect of the practice of meditation helps exercise precisely those mental skills that help me in developing, adapting and operating trading systems, namely: discipline, attention to detail, calm reflection, and insight.

I think this meditation stuff is important enough to teach my kids, and I dedicate quality time to it, and we have a blast learning and growing together as a family and as people. Anyway, that's how I see it from where I sit. Cheers!