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A commute to inner peace



By Trushar Barot
BBC News

It's hard to find a way out of the trudge of the daily commute, but some are finding meditation can help. And, don't worry, the lotus position is not a must.

Crowded, noisy, smelly, boring. Those in the rat race put up with this on their daily commute to and from work.

We are spending longer - and crossing greater distances - than a decade ago. The UK tops the European league table for having the longest average commuting time at 45 minutes.

No wonder commuting is seen by many as the most stressful part of their day, an activity hardly leavened by Dan Brown's latest or a sudoku puzzle. But for some, having a regular slot away from the pressures of home and work allows them time out to meditate.



Former Speaker Lord Weatherill, who died this week, meditated daily

Amisha Bhavsar, 30, does precisely that. She works at the Inner Space meditation centre in London's Covent Garden. As well as using the Tube to get to and from work, she uses public transport to travel around the city in the course of her working day.

"It's one thing offering people the opportunity to take a break from the working day when they come to us. But I've found that the quality of my experience at work is largely being set by my state of mind during the journey from home to my desk," she says.

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Inner peace

Research for the RAC Foundation has found similar benefits for those commuting by car. In a 2003 study, it found that if a driver gets into the right frame of mind, they can finish their daily journey in a more serene state than when they began it.

"The type of thought that occurs when driving is actually very similar to the type of brain activity that takes place during meditation," says Conrad King, who carried out the research for the RAC.

"The logical part of the brain tends to disengage leaving a lot of people driving on mental 'auto-pilot' and the driver is then free to contemplate all matters, from the meaning of life to the reason why traffic lights seem to always turn red against them."


Tim Malnick, founder of Meditation at Work, a consultancy that works with individuals and companies, says that many people have a misconception about what meditation is and so don't understand how it could be used while commuting.

"A lot of people think it's all about sitting down cross-legged and closing your eyes. But if you look at the meditation traditions from the East, they clearly demonstrate the importance of transferring this state of mind into all your daily activity. It's about becoming more aware of the environment around you and feeling comfortable with it."

Time out

Part of the reason that commuting is seen as such a stressful experience is because we feel we have so little control over that environment, says meditation teacher Matthew Earl, who used to clock up 40,000 miles a year in commuting for his job as a sales rep. Then he moved to London and started using public transport.

MEDITATING TIPS



- ◆ Listen to light music or meditation commentary
- ◆ Take slow, deep breaths
- ◆ Imagine a relaxing place
- ◆ Accept noise and confines of your journey
- ◆ Write positive affirmations
- ◆ If standing, put bag down and relax body and mind
- ◆ On bus or overground train, take in the view
- ◆ In a traffic jam, shift mind into neutral and relax body

Continued...

"I used to quite enjoy driving, it was personal time that I valued and it was an environment I felt relaxed in. Having to trade that in for the bus or the underground was really difficult - I couldn't stand the commuting experience."



Tune out distractions

While reading a book or newspaper kept his mind occupied, he found even that to be draining. Now, he uses meditation to relax mind and body.

"The first thing is to just mentally relax. With your thoughts, step away from what is around you and gently allow your awareness to go within yourself and emerge a sense of stillness and peace. Slow your breathing down and try and let your thoughts settle. Listening to light music or even meditation commentaries has been really helpful too."

It all sounds very soothing, but does it work? As a seasoned, though not season-ticketed, meditator, I thought I'd give it a go.

I get to the bus stop in plenty of time and wait. And wait. And wait. After 25 minutes, the 220 to Shepherd's Bush arrives. Not one bus - but three.



Ticket to inner peace

The usual commuter chant in such situations would be unrepeatable here, but instead I plant a different thought.

"Wait. There's nothing you can do, so calm down. The boss will not shout if you're a few minutes late."

My heart-rate drops almost instantly, but jolts on hearing the dulcet tones of 50 Cent, which a kindly school boy at the back is treating his fellow travellers to. Too much of a coward to ask him to lower the volume, I realise this is the perfect test of my meditation techniques.

I don't usually seek inner peace to a hip hop soundtrack, but it's surprisingly easy to turn the volume down inside my head. I pass the rest of the journey with a serene smile on my face.

It's enough to have me looking forward to my return journey home.

Below is a selection of your comments.

Meditating while commuting can be performed in various ways. You could listen to the sound waves coming towards you from the opposite direction until it passes you and then slowly diminishes. You may choose to ignore the meaning of chatter going around you and instead hear it as a noise and listen it to form various patterns (loud chatter, small whispers, laughter etc).

Deepak Sankhla, Mumbai, India

Ever since I was at school and waiting 30 mins for the bus home, I have entertained myself in my head. Running through films I enjoyed, visualising lovely places, having conversations where I always win the argument - all sorts of things. I never realised it was a shaman-like technique - just more interesting than moaning to strangers about the state of public transport. Very Feng Shui of me.

Sandy, Derby, UK

"If standing, put bag down and relax body and mind." Until you realise someone's nicked it while you've been zoned out.

Dave Williams, Warrington, UK

The key here is peripheral vision. A lot of meditation theory recommends finding a point of focus and becoming more aware of the periphery. This can be exaggerated when travelling as the focal point remains fixed and the periphery is moving. On a bus or train sit facing the direction of travel and make the focus the back of another traveller's head, for example. If driving, it works best if you make it a car in front (it also helps you keep your distance, and by being more aware of the periphery you become a safer driver, more in tune with sudden movement than if you are in the usual tunnel vision mode). The other key is to focus on the visual experience itself.

Allan, Scotland

Surely if you have a journey long enough to afford time to have a good relax, you would be better served finding work nearer home? You would then cut out a large amount of this "stress" by not having to deal with it on a daily basis.

Stuart, Southampton

I both drive and get the bus/tram to work, and I'm often surprised to see other people looking stressed in their cars etc on my way. I use the time to think, to listen to the radio and to just watch life go by. Jams don't phase me, and I have a boss who understands that sometimes the traffic is just against you. I find it a useful time to just calm down and relax before and after work. Maybe there should be classes in commuter meditation for those who have found themselves at the grip of road rage in the past?

Heather, Wolverhampton

This is all very well, but I usually go to sleep on the train.

Sean Fernyhough, Broseley, Shropshire

I commute four hours a day from North Essex to Kensington. To be honest, I enjoy it. The train, on which I get a seat 95% of the time, allows me time to relax, listen to the radio or music, maybe scroll through morning e-mails, prepare myself for the day ahead. Then, rather than brave the Tube, I cycle from Liverpool Street to Kensington, which kick-starts my metabolism and my day. It's about having the right attitude, not about meditation. You can't do anything about it if you're late, and it's not going to cause Armageddon if you are. So relax. What's more, I have a head start on my colleagues as my brain has been active for three hours by the time they get in.

Olivia Grace, Halstead/Kensington

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