

Meditation for Hackers: All-Point Techniques

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My experience has been that meditation is a subject that frequently polarizes people: some believe credulously in all kinds of unsupported nonsense; some eject everything wholesale in the name of skepticism.

However, meditation is a useful way to hack your mind state, while still preserving intellectual independence. Rather than taking some guru's preferred version of one technique as the One True Way, you just have to get to know a variety of the techniques available, tweak them to work for your own world-view & symbol set, and understand what **about** them makes them actually work.

I've talked with a fair number of people about this, and one misconception that comes up often is that "meditation" exclusively means "sitting in a dark, quiet room in lotus position smelling incense and thinking about nothing". This is indeed one method of meditation (called *mushin*, or "empty mind"). It is far from the only one, though, and it's not one necessarily the easiest first approach for everyone - especially people used to multitasking, like most hackers.

Another misconception is that meditation is to be treated as something that you do only in special, short periods of time. This implies that *most* of the time you are not in a meditative mind state... but the whole point of meditation is to change your everyday life.

There certainly is a place for separate, exclusively focused meditation. Here, however, is one class of methods I call "all-point" techniques. What makes this class of methods work is the combination of a very rich environment and the strategy of not concentrating overly on any particular piece of it. It is particularly well suited to being one's first technique, and to easy, everyday practice.

1. "Soft eyes"

This is a relatively common technique in martial arts.

Instead of focusing on the eyes or hands of the person you are talking with (or trying to disarm), aim your eyes around their neck area and keep a soft focus, both mentally and literally.

A good way to check this technique is to ask yourself a series of questions:

- Where is their right hand and what are they holding?
- What is in their pockets? (Pants, chest, under-arm holster, buttocks...)
- How tense are the muscles around and above their eyes? Shoulders? Neck?
- How fast are they breathing?
- How are they about to move?
- Who and what is nearby? Where is the nearest exit?

The way to tell whether you're doing this right is to see if you can answer all of these questions with only minimal, if any, movement of your eyes and attention; you should be able to see all of it simultaneously.

This is not an exclusively martial technique, though it's certainly useful for that; try just doing it with everyone you see.

The point is to be able to **notice** as much as possible, without telegraphing what you are looking at, and without having your attention exclusively focused on one bit. (Magicians and fighters both like it when they can use misdirection to make you not notice what's within your sight.)

2. Really enjoying nature

Go somewhere you'll find beautiful. I'll use hills as an example since that's what I most enjoy, but anything vibrant will work.

Normally, when most people go to "enjoy nature", they either barely notice it at all because they're distracted by equipment, their latest argument, planning the next day's work, etc; they notice one spotlighted bit at a time; or they notice only a very vague ambiance.

Instead, try to individually see everything in detail.

An easy way to do this is to start by limiting your attention to two things; for example, feeling wind on your skin and seeing the clouds move. See as much detail as you can in those two things. Then add a third, such as the feel of sunlight or the movement of a patch of grass nearby.

The key lies in adding more things to your attention *simultaneously* without losing detail in the previously perceived ones. This can very quickly become overwhelming; the amount of information in any natural scene is extremely dense. Even a small patch of grass will have enough movement and detail in it to swamp your multithreading.

Fortunately, this is a learnable skill. With practice, you'll find that your effective threadcount and buffer size go up.

As a nice bonus, the more you can really notice, the more enjoyable it is.

3. Individuals in crowds

What did you notice the last time you walked down the street?

It's interesting that the amount you relate to people as individuals tends to be inversely related to the number of people present. Crowds gain a separate character of their own; it's easier to simply interpret them as a mass. This is also true in reverse; being a member of a crowd makes one less apt to empathize with others as individuals. Look up the case of Kitty Genovese for one sad example.

Next time you are out, try to notice faces, body posture, and the distances people stand from each other, rather than glazing over. Don't attach too much to each personal drama; just notice, recognize, and keep moving.

The goal for this is to increase your the scope of things you can take in consciously, making a "mere" walk down the street a somewhat more alive experience.

For more on facial emotion recognition, I highly recommend the work of Paul Ekman; for more on the significance of proximity in human interaction, I recommend Edward T. Hall, [The Hidden Dimension](#) and [The Silent Language](#).

Conclusion

There are many other situations in which you can practice this “all-point” technique: playing RTSs and other games with lots of things happening at once; listening to complex multi-part music such as Rachmaninoff, Bach, or Godspeed You! Black Emperor; noticing all the background sounds in any environment; etc.

The purpose of this class of techniques is to learn to be able to deal with highly multithreaded, content-rich, real-time situations in a serene manner, so you can not only experience as much of it as possible but also do so without being overwhelmed. This is a lot like the eventual purpose of traditional empty-mind meditation; it's just a different approach.

I've given just a few ways of doing this. It's up to you to figure out one that'll be effective for you and how to tailor it to your situation. Remember to ensure that your techniques of choice are ones that you can keep up on a daily basis; the more you can integrate this way of interacting with the world as a day-to-day habit, the more effective it'll be at shifting your baseline mind state.

If you have any feedback on this or are interested in seeing more, please contact me. I'm working on a book tentatively entitled *A Hacker's Guide to Meditation: Practical Recipes Without the Dogma*, which aims to be a complete guide to all known classes of effective techniques—of which this article discusses just one—from a pragmatic, open-source perspective. This includes techniques traditionally taught as meditation, psychotherapy, and more. If you find this useful, or if you have a technique or variant I might not have heard of, let me know.

Happy (mind-)hacking!

Sai Emrys is a recent graduate of UC Berkeley in cognitive science, looking to do doctoral work in the neuroscience of empathy. Some other interests include running the Language Creation Conference (conlangs.berkeley.edu), making music interpretations in American Sign Language (YouTube [saizai](#)), coding in Ruby on Rails, and consulting on international business.