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Meditation-Related Sleep Interference: A Neurobehavioral Framework for Persistent Wakefulness During Sleep Initiation

Bruce D. Forman, PhD*

Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine, Florida Atlantic University, USA

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***Corresponding author:** Bruce D. Forman, PhD, Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA, E-mail: drbruceforman@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Meditation is frequently used to address sleep disturbance, yet contemplative practices can also cultivate wakefulness and sustained attention. Reports of sleep disruption during intensive or advanced practice, together with observations of altered sleep physiology in experienced meditators, suggest that its effects depend on practice type, length of practice session, timing and individual vulnerability. This critical narrative review integrates clinical sleep medicine, contemplative neuroscience and sleep-transition physiology to examine a possible mechanism for meditation-associated difficulty initiating or resuming sleep. A state-mismatch hypothesis is proposed: attentional stabilization or sustained monitoring that is adaptive during waking practice may, in some circumstances, persist into the presleep period and interfere with the disengagement from deliberate cognitive control that ordinarily accompanies sleep onset. The proposed phenotype, provisionally termed “calm wakefulness with persistent attentional engagement,” is not a validated disorder or an established neural signature. It may coexist with conventional insomnia, circadian misalignment, insufficient sleep opportunity, or other causes of nocturnal wakefulness. Evidence from mindfulness trials supports modest improvements in subjective sleep relative to nonspecific controls, whereas observational studies and qualitative reports document heterogeneous wake-promoting or sleep-disruptive experiences. Neither literature demonstrates that attentional persistence causes insomnia. This paper distinguishes established findings from mechanistic hypotheses, outline a differential clinical assessment and propose within-person experimental designs combining polysomnography, high-density electroencephalography and practice manipulation. Clinical recommendations are provisional: identify problematic timing or technique without discouraging beneficial practice, retain established insomnia treatments when indicated and avoid interpreting short sleep as reduced biological sleep need.

Keywords: Meditation, Mindfulness, Insomnia, Sleep onset, Arousal, Electroencephalography, Attentional control, Contemplative neuroscience

1. Introduction

Mindfulness-based approaches can improve subjective sleep, particularly when compared with nonspecific active controls. In a systematic review of 18 randomized trials involving 1,654 participants, Rusch and colleagues found moderate-strength evidence of improvement relative to nonspecific controls but no demonstrated advantage over specific active interventions¹. Meditation therefore warrants neither dismissal as a sleep intervention nor the assumption that all forms of practice are sedating. Mindfulness-based approaches to insomnia emphasize acceptance, reduced struggle and a changed relationship to nocturnal wakefulness².

The apparent paradox is that some contemplative traditions explicitly train alertness rather than sleepiness. Britton and colleagues reviewed traditional accounts and experimental observations suggesting that wake-promoting effects may vary with expertise and training trajectory³. Qualitative interviews with Western Buddhist practitioners have also documented a broad range of meditation-related difficulties, including altered sleep and arousal; these observations establish that adverse experiences are reported, not their incidence or cause⁴. The clinically relevant question is whether an individual who is calm but persistently attentive at bedtime may experience difficulty transitioning to sleep without the familiar subjective anxiety of psychophysiological insomnia.

This review advances a specific, falsifiable hypothesis rather than claiming to identify a new disorder. Its neurological focus is the interaction between attention networks, interoceptive monitoring and the distributed neural transitions of sleep onset. It also considers the important alternative that changes in sleep may be unrelated to attentional persistence or may reflect an already established insomnia disorder.

2. Scope and Approach

This is a focused critical narrative review and conceptual synthesis, not a systematic review or meta-analysis. The source literature was examined against primary research, reviews and clinical guidelines in contemplative neuroscience, sleep physiology and behavioral sleep medicine. Priority was given to studies that directly measured sleep or wakefulness, differentiated meditation experience or practice type, or addressed the validity of the proposed mechanisms. Foundational publications were retained where they defined the relevant theoretical constructs. The included studies were not selected through a prospectively registered exhaustive search and no pooled estimates or formal risk-of-bias ratings are claimed.

The synthesis separates three levels of evidence: established observations concerning meditation, attention, or sleep; associations between contemplative experience and sleep physiology; and the proposed causal mechanism linking a particular practice configuration to sleep-onset interference. The third level remains untested directly.

3. What the Empirical Literature Establishes

3.1. Meditation can improve sleep, but the comparator matters

Meditation-based interventions appear to benefit some individuals with sleep complaints, plausibly through reduced rumination, greater acceptance and less secondary distress.

However, the meta-analysis by Rusch and colleagues did not demonstrate superiority over specific active treatments¹. A metacognitive model proposed by Ong and colleagues explains how mindfulness and acceptance might reduce secondary arousal, but it is a theoretical account rather than proof of a unique neural mechanism². The clinical implication is that meditation should be matched to the patient and the treatment goal, not assumed to be a universally sleep-inducing activity.

3.2. Experienced practice is associated with heterogeneous sleep findings

Britton and colleagues assembled evidence that some practices cultivate alertness and may be associated with shorter sleep or altered wakefulness³. In a small study, Kaul and colleagues observed shorter recorded sleep among seven experienced meditators than among 23 controls and transient improvements in psychomotor vigilance after meditation in novice participants⁴. These findings are hypothesis-generating: small samples, self-selection, heterogeneous practices and the absence of longitudinal randomization prevent inference that meditation reduces physiological sleep need. Vigilance performance over a limited testing interval is not a substitute for comprehensive assessment of sleep debt or long-term health.

In a matched polysomnographic study, Ferrarelli and colleagues found higher parietal-occipital gamma activity during Non-Rapid-Eye-Movement (NREM) sleep in long-term meditators. The experienced group also had shorter total sleep time and more wake after sleep onset, but sleep-onset latency did not differ⁵. The gamma finding was not related to spontaneous arousal during NREM sleep and should not be interpreted as direct evidence of insomnia, continuous conscious awareness, or a causal effect of evening meditation. These distinctions are particularly important for the present hypothesis, which specifically concerns the transition into sleep rather than sleep maintenance.

3.3. Meditation-related difficulties are real reports, not a defined phenotype

Lindahl and colleagues used mixed methods to characterize challenging contemplative experiences in Western Buddhists⁶. The study provides detailed phenomenology and contextual factors but does not estimate population prevalence or establish that sleep disturbance results from a single neurophysiological mechanism. Sleep complaints during retreats may reflect multiple simultaneous exposures, including intensive practice, altered schedules, environmental conditions, reduced sleep opportunity, social context, or pre-existing vulnerability. A calm subjective state does not itself demonstrate low cortical, autonomic, or endocrine arousal.

4. Neural Plausibility of the State-Mismatch Hypothesis

4.1. Attentional training is not equivalent to relaxation

Focused-attention practices typically involve maintaining an object of attention and detecting distraction; open-monitoring practices emphasize awareness of changing experience without sustained fixation on a single object. These categories overlap and practitioners vary in how they implement them. Contemplative neuroscience implicates distributed attention, salience and self-referential networks, but findings depend on technique, expertise and task⁷. The inference that training produces a uniformly

persistent, highly coherent cortical state is too broad. A narrower possibility is that, for certain individuals, the habit of monitoring or repeatedly stabilizing attention becomes especially accessible when awake in bed.

Interoceptive monitoring may contribute when subtle bodily sensations repeatedly capture attention. The proposed effect is context-dependent: awareness of bodily experience may reduce distress in one individual and maintain wake-oriented monitoring in another. There is presently no validated marker of excessive interoceptive precision in meditators with sleep-onset complaints and predictive-processing language should be treated as a model rather than an observed mechanism.

4.2. Sleep onset is a distributed transition, not global cortical shutdown

Sleep onset involves changing thalamocortical dynamics, reduced responsiveness and reconfiguration of large-scale functional connectivity. Tagliazucchi and Laufs demonstrated that typical resting-state functional magnetic resonance imaging sessions include detectable transitions between wakefulness and sleep⁸. These findings support the importance of monitoring vigilance when interpreting neural network activity. They do not show that all executive or salience activity must disappear before sleep can occur, nor that a particular meditation-related connectivity pattern blocks the transition.

The attention-intention-effort model of insomnia describes how attempts to regulate sleep can paradoxically increase sleep-related monitoring⁹. The proposed meditation-related pathway is related but distinct in its putative trigger: an established attentional habit rather than explicit effort to force sleep. Nevertheless, the two pathways may converge and an individual may acquire conventional anticipatory sleep anxiety after repeated nights of difficulty. Functional neuroimaging research supports heterogeneity within insomnia and cautions against equating one neural pattern with a universal hyperarousal mechanism¹⁰.

4.3. A provisional phenotype: calm wakefulness with persistent attentional engagement

We use the descriptive term calm wakefulness with persistent attentional engagement for reports of sustained awareness during attempted sleep without prominent worry or perceived distress. This term is preferable to treating a construct such as non-anxious hyperarousal as an established diagnostic entity: hyperarousal has multiple physiological definitions and the absence of reported anxiety does not prove heightened neural activation. The hypothesis predicts that, in a susceptible subgroup, certain attentional practices near bedtime or during nocturnal awakening will increase sustained monitoring and prolong objectively measured sleep-onset latency compared with matched lower-monitoring practices.

Alternative explanations include inaccurate perception of sleep onset, circadian delay, insufficient homeostatic sleep pressure, sleep-disordered breathing, restless legs syndrome, medication or stimulant effects, bipolar-spectrum activation and pre-existing insomnia. A report of feeling rested despite short sleep should not be taken as evidence that meditation replaces sleep. Persistent reduction in sleep need with elevated energy or behavioral change requires appropriate clinical assessment.

5. Practice Characteristics and Individual Moderators

Practice type, timing, intensity, retreat conditions and expertise are plausible moderators, but no sufficiently powered trial has established their independent contributions to meditation-associated insomnia. Focused-attention training may be more likely than some other practices to sustain deliberate monitoring immediately before bed, yet an open-monitoring practice can also be alerting and a body scan can become a form of symptom surveillance. Technique labels alone are therefore inadequate proxies for the cognitive process actually occurring.

A within-person history can be more informative than years of experience alone. Did the sleep complaint begin after a new technique, longer sessions, a retreat, or a shift toward nighttime practice? Does it improve on nights when practice is earlier or omitted? Does it persist when practice is unchanged but sleep timing or stress changes? Such temporal relationships are useful for formulation but do not by themselves establish causation.

6. Clinical Assessment and Provisional Management

The first clinical task is to establish whether the person has insomnia disorder, inadequate sleep opportunity, a circadian rhythm disorder, or another cause of wakefulness. Standard sleep history, sleep diary and validated symptom measures remain essential. The clinician should ask about daytime impairment and safety, not merely hours slept. Meditation history should include technique, timing, duration, recent intensification, retreat participation, intentional wakefulness practices and the subjective quality of presleep attention.

If the complaint is temporally associated with a specific practice, a collaborative and reversible adjustment may be reasonable: move alertness-oriented sessions earlier, reduce intensity near bedtime, or temporarily substitute a less effortful wind-down activity. These are proposed pragmatic modifications, not validated treatments for a distinct disorder. Patients should not be instructed to suppress awareness, achieve a particular brain state, or monitor whether attention has sufficiently dissolved; those instructions could create a new performance demand.

For persistent insomnia, cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) remains the evidence-based first-line psychological treatment¹¹. Standard stimulus control can address prolonged wakefulness in bed, including after meditation, while the treatment plan respects the person's contemplative goals. Meditation itself need not be abandoned if it is beneficial during the day. When nocturnal awakenings occur, clinicians can help patients distinguish a chosen contemplative practice from an automatic habit of sustained monitoring and avoid substituting one form of sleep effort for another.

(Table 1) provides a differential assessment and proposed response. The recommendations are intentionally conservative because direct trials of practice modification for meditation-associated insomnia have not been conducted.

7. A Research Program Capable of Testing the Hypothesis

The proposed mechanism is falsifiable. A first study could recruit experienced practitioners reporting reproducible evening-practice-related sleep interference, experienced practitioners without this complaint and meditation-naïve controls. Baseline characterization should include sleep diary, actigraphy,

practice logs, insomnia symptoms, circadian preference, mood, medications and screening for sleep disorders. A randomized within-person crossover could compare an alertness-oriented evening session, a matched lower-monitoring practice and a

nonmeditative control on separate nights. Session length, light exposure, bedtime and expectancy should be measured or controlled.

Table 1: Clinical differentiation and provisional responses.

Presentation or finding	Interpretive question	Provisional clinical response
Calm but prolonged wakefulness after evening practice	Temporal relationship to technique, duration, or retreat?	Sleep diary and reversible change in practice timing; reassess.
Worry about the consequences of poor sleep	Has secondary insomnia-related threat developed?	CBT-I formulation, including cognitive and behavioral maintaining factors.
Short sleep with no complaint of impairment	Is sleep opportunity adequate and is sleep objectively reduced?	Avoid assuming reduced biological sleep need; assess functioning and monitor.
Variable bedtime, late light exposure, or stimulant use	Could circadian or behavioral factors explain delay?	Address timing, light, caffeine and consistent wake time.
Snoring, restless legs, unusual nocturnal events, or medication changes	Is another sleep or medical condition present?	Appropriate sleep or medical evaluation.
Markedly reduced sleep need with elevated mood or increased activity	Could a mood episode or other acute condition be present?	Prompt clinical assessment; do not attribute automatically to meditation.

Polysomnography with high-density electroencephalography could quantify sleep-onset latency, wake after sleep onset, spectral activity and event-related dynamics. Simultaneous respiration and autonomic measures would help distinguish attentional persistence from physiological arousal. Repeated brief experience sampling before lights-out, rather than frequent prompts during sleep onset, could characterize monitoring without materially disturbing the transition. Prespecified analyses should test whether the effect of practice condition on sleep latency differs by symptom group and whether measured attentional persistence temporally precedes the sleep outcome.

A subsequent intervention trial could compare individualized practice timing or technique modification with an attention-matched control in individuals with confirmed, persistent complaints. Changes in sleep should be assessed with both patient-reported and objective outcomes and competing explanations such as expectancy, mood and circadian timing should be evaluated. A causal claim about a specific neural mediator would require verified target engagement, repeated measurement and a temporally appropriate mediation analysis, not simply simultaneous improvement in sleep and an EEG index (Table 2).

Table 2: Evidence-to-inference map.

Evidence	Supported inference	What remains unproven
Rusch, et al. ¹ : randomized-trial meta-analysis	Meditation can improve subjective sleep relative to nonspecific active controls.	Superiority to established active treatment or benefit for all techniques and practitioners.
Lindahl, et al. ⁶ : mixed-methods interviews	Sleep-related challenges occur within heterogeneous meditation-related experiences.	Population prevalence, causal attribution, or a specific neurological phenotype.
Kaul, et al. ⁴ : small experimental and observational studies	Acute vigilance changes and shorter sleep in a small experienced sample.	Replacement of physiological sleep or causal effects of expertise.
Ferrarelli, et al. ⁵ : matched PSG and high-density EEG	Long-term meditators can differ in NREM gamma activity and some sleep measures.	That gamma reflects conscious wakefulness or causes sleep-onset insomnia.
Tagliazucchi and Laufs ⁸ : sleep-transition fMRI	Wake-sleep transitions alter functional network measurements.	A meditation-specific neural barrier to sleep onset.
Present framework	Testable state-mismatch hypothesis.	A validated phenotype, causal mechanism, or proven practice-modification treatment.

8. Limitations

The proposed phenotype has not been prospectively validated. The evidence base combines different meditation traditions, populations, outcome measures and study designs. Several of the most directly relevant studies are small or observational and studies of expert meditators do not necessarily represent patients seeking help for insomnia. Objective evidence that a particular attentional practice delays sleep onset is especially limited; one prominent polysomnographic study found no between-group difference in sleep-onset latency [6]. The review is selective rather than systematic and the proposed neurological account is one of several plausible explanations. Any claim that trained awareness becomes the brain's default mode, that noradrenergic activation remains elevated, or that predictive precision prevents sleep would exceed available direct evidence.

9. Conclusion

Meditation can reduce sleep-related distress while also cultivating alertness. A subset of practitioner's report sleep interference, but the underlying mechanisms remain uncertain. It is proposed that, in some individuals and contexts, persistent attentional engagement may be mismatched with the transition into sleep. This is a hypothesis to be tested, not an established explanation for short sleep-in experienced meditators. The immediate clinical priority is careful differential assessment and individualized, reversible adjustment of practice when a temporal relationship is plausible, alongside established insomnia care when indicated. Neurologically informative research will require experimental practice manipulation, objective sleep measurement and explicit testing of competing mechanisms.

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