

Why do we feel happy during the state of ‘Molip’?

I. Introduction

There are moments when the world seems to narrow. Background noise fades, time slips by unnoticed, and attention settles so completely on a single goal that nothing else feels real. In these moments, effort disappears, thinking becomes strangely enjoyable, and the mind feels both intensely active and deeply calm. This raises an important question: what is that state, and can we intentionally get ourselves into it? Throughout history, philosophers, psychologists, spiritual teachers, and scientists have tried to understand the nature and mechanisms of this state.

Maslow sees this as *self-actualisation*, which he describes as a peak experience of human potential. Csikszentmihalyi calls it *‘flow,’* the state where challenge and skill perfectly match. Hindu meditation describes *samadhi* as the mind uniting with its object, while Buddhist *Ganhwaseon* trains practitioners to focus on a single question until enlightenment breaks through. More recently, Professor Hwang Nong-Moon, after repeatedly experiencing this state over a period of seven years, began to study from a neuroscientific perspective. Through his research, he identified his experience as *‘Molip’* and attempted to explain why deep and sustained focus leads to calmness and fulfilment.

This paper explores these different perspectives and records side by side, and examines not only why the state of ‘molip’ enhances productivity, but also why it leads to happiness.

II. Perspectives on Immersion

a. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Fig 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory by Abraham Maslow that proposes people are motivated by a series of needs arranged

in a hierarchy, from basic survival to self-fulfilment. He contended that once people had the basics fulfilled, they could focus on becoming their best selves. At the very top of that pyramid is the *self-actualisation*. It is the pursuit of realising one's full potential through personal growth, creativity, or achieving meaningful goals.² Maslow described it as the desire 'to become everything one is capable of becoming'. Although Maslow did not believe that many of us could achieve true self-actualisation, he did believe that all of us experience transitory moments, known as 'peak experiences', of self-actualisation. Such moments, associated with personally significant events such as childbirth, sporting achievement and examination success, are difficult to achieve and maintain consistently. Often, they arise naturally rather than being something we can deliberately control.

In short, these were moments of complete absorption, when you lose track of time, forget about yourself, and feel deeply alive. Maslow thought these experiences weren't just pleasant—they were essential glimpses of what it means to reach your full potential. In other words, immersion wasn't just about focus for him. It was about stepping into the highest form of human growth, even if only for a short while.

b. Csikszentmihalyi's Theory of Flow

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi gave this feeling its most famous name, *Flow*. He studied artists, athletes, scientists, and everyday people who got so wrapped up in what they were doing that everything else seemed to disappear. Csikszentmihalyi described this state of flow as the "optimal experience." It occurs when the challenge of a task balances one's skill level. If the task is too easy, they get bored, and when it's too hard, they feel anxious or frustrated. But when it's just right, something changes.

It can be argued that Csikszentmihalyi's *Theory of Flow* better explain the moment of immersion than Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. While the peak experience is something uncontrollable, the state of flow is something we can control, if and only when an immense effort is put in.

Thus, Flow can be defined as a psychological state in which individuals become fully absorbed in an activity, experiencing optimal engagement and enjoyment, often referred to as being “in the zone.”³

c. Samadhi in Hinduism

In Hindu philosophy, Samadhi represents the final stage of meditation. It is the highest state of mental concentration that people can achieve while still bound to the body and which unites them with the highest reality.⁴ It is also a state of joyful calm, or even of rapture and beatitude, in which one maintains one’s full mental alertness and acuity. Distractions fall away, the usual mental chatter quiets down, and what’s left is a deep sense of stillness and clarity. In Buddhism, samadhi is the last of the eight steps leading to enlightenment, which is the last step in the Eightfold Path.

Like the flow, Samadhi can be reached with enough dedication. However, one of its biggest drawbacks, compared to self-actualisation and the state of flow, is that it takes years of practice to master. In other words, it can be argued that Samdhi is the hardest way to get into the moment of immersion.

d. Ganhwaseon in Buddhism

Korean Seon (Zen) Buddhism developed its own approach to deep concentration called *Ganhwaseon*. Practitioners take a *hwadu*, a short and often puzzling phrase or question, and focus on it completely. The goal isn’t to solve the question intellectually but to stay with it so fully that all the usual distractions and inner commentary fade away. Over time, this single-pointed focus is said to open the door to awakening or enlightenment. Ganhwaseon teaches that truth isn’t found through endless thinking but through this stripped-down, concentrated attention. It’s a practice of returning again and again to one thing until everything else falls away.

e. Hwang Nong Moon’s Theory of Molip

Professor Hwang’s interest in immersion began with his own experience. He solved many conundrums while he was working at the Korea Research Institute of Standards and Science, and

these achievements later led to his appointment as a professor at Seoul National University. Across these experiences, he noticed a pattern: he solved by thinking about the problem every second, but he didn't feel tired at all. Instead, he felt happy and wanted to keep it going.

For a long time, he didn't even know what to call it. It was only later, after he began studying neuroscience to understand the mental state he had repeatedly experienced, that he realised it was very similar to Samadhi in meditation traditions. He eventually published his work on this phenomenon, which he termed *Molip*, during his time as a professor at Seoul National University.

During those moments of deep immersion, which he calls the state of '*Molip*,' Professor Hwang noticed something unusual. He became happier and happier as he stayed in the state of *Molip*, and he no longer felt driven by greed. Instead, he felt a natural kindness toward others, a genuine desire to help. This led him to believe that human nature might be fundamentally good.

Professor Hwang also saw a difference between his and others' views of immersion. In his experience, immersion wasn't just a fleeting moment of insight or peace. He believed it could be sustained over the long term and even used as a source of creativity and innovation. He argued that *Molip* seemed to trigger high levels of dopamine and serotonin in the brain, which might explain why people often perform at their best in this state. At the same time, he warned that staying in this state of *Molip* excessively could have side effects, leading to mental health risks.

III. Sciences

a. Christof Koch's Theory of Consciousness

Christof Koch's theory of consciousness posits that consciousness emerges when a network of neurons, which he refers to as a neural assembly, becomes strongly integrated across the brain. This means that there is a basic unit in the consciousness. Although synapses are constantly firing throughout the brain, most of this activity remains in the unconscious mind. It isn't enough for

neurons to simply fire; for awareness to arise, there needs to be a basic unit of neurons working together in a coordinated way, sharing information across different regions. When this integration reaches a certain level, subjective awareness appears. When it drops below that threshold, for example, in deep sleep or under anaesthesia, consciousness fades or disappears.

b. Global Workspace Theory (GWT)

Global Workspace Theory (GWT), developed by cognitive psychologist Bernard Baars, modernises what philosophers once called “Cartesian theatre.” In this view, the mind functions like a stage where conscious thought unfolds in front of a vast, unseen audience. The audience represents the unconscious: long-term memories, habits, emotions, and background processes that watch but stay in the dark.

On stage, only a few actors can perform under the spotlight at any given time. These actors are the thoughts, perceptions, or problems that currently hold our attention. The stage itself is working memory, small and limited, while the audience in the dark is enormous, holding a lifetime of long-term memories. Synapses fire in this audience all the time, retrieving memories and influencing what appears on stage, even though most of this activity stays outside awareness.

c. Connection to Molip

Both Christof Koch’s theory and Global Workspace Theory help explain what’s happening in the brain when we experience deep immersion. While these ideas extend beyond Bernard Baars’ original formulation, Professor Hwang employs the stage metaphor of Global Workspace Theory to explain how immersion, or Molip, can be intentionally cultivated. Who gets the spotlight depends on competing stimuli. A loud noise, for example, can push aside whatever was being read on stage, seizing control of attention. The “director,” representing our conscious control, can bring focus back to the original task by shining the light there again, blocking out distractions. This ability to keep the spotlight steady, often described as the control of consciousness, is what we often mean by focus or immersion.

The theory also explains problem-solving. If a difficult problem stays under the spotlight long enough, audience members, which are the long-term memories, start climbing onto the stage, bringing relevant knowledge. Easy problems call on memories seated near the stage; harder ones require memories buried deep in the unconscious, which take longer to arrive. Maintaining attention on the problem gives those distant memories time to surface, which is why persistence so often leads to insight.

Finally, this perspective suggests that managing this stage shapes our lives. According to Global Workspace Theory, the unconscious is not a vague or abstract concept but includes concrete structures such as long-term memory. Long-term memory is formed through changes in synaptic connections, and these modified synapses, in turn, constitute a core part of the self. The contents of consciousness influence synaptic activity, and the resulting changes in synapses feed back into consciousness. Through this continuous interaction between consciousness and the unconscious, the sense of self is gradually formed.

From this view, if we let random distractions dominate the spotlight, we become reactive, ruled by whatever stimulus is strongest. However, if we intentionally keep meaningful goals on stage while suppressing irrelevant thoughts, we can guide the unconscious audience to contribute memories and insights that support the life we want to build. This is where deliberate focus, or intentional immersion, becomes essential: by controlling the contents of consciousness, we influence synaptic change, which ultimately shapes one's identity and life trajectory.

Molip starts when we deliberately place a specific goal or problem on the stage of consciousness and keep it there. As this goal stays under the spotlight, related long-term memories in the unconscious begin to activate, entering the state of heightened readiness. The more these memories are activated, the deeper the immersion. These activated memories interact with working memory, feeding relevant information back to the conscious mind. When one of these activated

memories is successfully triggered and fires, it often produces a strong sense of insight and reward, accompanied by a surge of dopamine. This explains why, when we're truly immersed, even thinking about the problem feels stimulating and rewarding. New ideas cause sensation, and sensation releases dopamine in excess.

Long-term memory activation isn't just a by-product of immersion; rather, it's the core of it. The degree of long-term memory activation equals the depth of immersion. When long-term memory related to a single goal becomes strongly activated, the stimulus emerging from the unconscious increases in strength and comes to dominate the stage of consciousness. As a result, irrelevant thoughts do not enter awareness, not because they are actively suppressed, but because their stimulus is relatively too weak to compete with the intensified stimulus associated with the goal. In this state, attention is no longer maintained solely through effortful control by the prefrontal cortex; instead, the unconscious supports and stabilises consciousness. This explains why Molip can be sustained over long periods as a calm and stable form of concentration.

This also explains why breakthroughs often happen after long periods, about 40 hours or more, of focused effort. This duration is frequently reported by Professor Hwang and is not proposed as a fixed biological threshold but as an empirically observed pattern, repeatedly experienced over many years. At this point, immersion shifts into a stable, self-maintaining state similar to Samadhi, a stable, self-sustaining state in which consciousness becomes fully occupied by a single stream of thought. In this state, thinking about the problem itself becomes intrinsically rewarding, allowing immersion to persist without conscious effort and preventing irrelevant thoughts from entering awareness. The state persists even into sleep, indicating that long-term memory activation has reached a level at which it maintains itself automatically.

Neurocognitive processes during sleep further support this state. Research presented in *Dreaming*⁹ by Allan Hobson shows that during sleep, particularly in REM-related phases, activity in the prefrontal cortex decreases, reducing its usual inhibitory control over emotional and long-term

memory systems. At the same time, neurochemical conditions shift: neurotransmitters associated with short-term memory decline, while those supporting long-term memory retrieval become more prominent. As a result, activated long-term memories and emotionally linked associations are released more freely and can interact with working memory. This helps explain why insights often emerge during sleep or upon waking, and why moments of solution after extended immersion can feel sudden or even “miraculous.”

Eureka moments often arrive unexpectedly, such as while waking up, showering, or walking, but according to Professor Hwang, the actual problem-solving frequently occurs earlier, during a state of deep immersion that persists into sleep. When immersion reaches a stable, Samadhi-like state, the mind remains fully occupied by the central problem even during rest. This corresponds to stages described in meditative traditions, beginning with dongjeong ilyeo (동정일여), where the thought persists regardless of movement or stillness, and extending to mongjung ilyeo (몽중일여), where the same thought continues through both waking and dreaming. At its deepest level, immersion enters sukmyeon ilyeo (숙면일여), in which even deep sleep is unified around a single problem. In this state, sleep is not disrupted but becomes deeper, as consciousness is no longer fragmented by competing thoughts.

During deep sleep, activity in the prefrontal cortex decreases, releasing its usual inhibitory control over long-term memory. This allows memory retrieval and associative thinking to operate with unusually high efficiency, sometimes producing solutions or insights that are generated outside of conscious awareness. However, because neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine are relatively low during sleep, these insights are often not encoded into short-term memory and therefore not retained upon waking. As these neurotransmitters rise again during the day, fragments of the previously generated ideas may resurface into consciousness, creating the experience of a sudden Eureka moment. In this sense, insight is not created at the moment it is noticed, but rather remembered imperfectly from work already done during deep immersion.

Qualitative evidence for theory of Molip is further supported by repeated first-person reports collected by Professor Hwang over many years. These accounts, primarily submitted via detailed emails, consistently describe a progression rather than an abrupt shift. Individuals report beginning with deliberate, effort-based concentration on a single goal, repeatedly returning their attention to the same problem despite fatigue or distraction. After a sustained period of such intentional focus, the experience changes: concentration no longer feels effortful, the problem remains continuously present in awareness, and immersion becomes self-sustaining. At this stage, participants describe being able to remain absorbed without conscious effort, often experiencing a sense of stability, enjoyment, and persistence that extends into rest and sleep.

For example, a Korean university entrance exam(Suneung) retaker reported maintaining immersion for over sixteen hours per day. He stated, “at first, it was painful and frustrating because nothing was being solved, but after continuing to think without stopping, studying no longer feels exhausting; instead, thinking itself becomes increasingly enjoyable, and time passes without awareness of fatigue. I feel like I’m a genius.”¹⁰ Another student described his experience of Molip, stating that “Every time, I feel math is a subject that becomes more interesting the more you learn it and the more you think about it. At this point, I enjoy it so much that I would want to study mathematics as a hobby even after the Suneung is over.”¹¹

Similar patterns appear beyond academic settings. A professional consultant reported that after several weeks of sustained Molip, he had “grown more in a few weeks than in the past ten years,”¹² attributing this change not to increased effort but to uninterrupted engagement with a single problem. In a follow-up email, he added that “the most surprising part was that I did not feel tired, even though I was thinking constantly.”

Across these reports, participants repeatedly describe characteristics of theory of Molip: persistence of focus without fatigue in a relaxed state, enjoyment arising from thinking itself, continuation of immersion into rest, and sudden problem resolution without conscious strain. These

qualitative patterns closely align with Professor Hwang's theoretical claim that Molip is not a transient peak state, but a stable, self-reinforcing mode of consciousness that emerges through sustained intentional engagement.

IV. Conclusion

Throughout history, immersion has been explored from psychological, spiritual, and scientific perspectives. Maslow saw it as brief moments of self-actualisation, Csikszentmihalyi described it as a flow state where challenge and skill align, and meditation traditions like Samadhi and Ganhwaseon treated it as a path to transcendence. Professor Hwang added a modern layer, arguing that Molip is not just a passing state but something that can be sustained and used as a source of creativity, clarity, and joy.

Christof Koch's theory and Global Workspace Theory help explain why this happens. Consciousness depends on integrated neural activity and the careful management of the brain's "stage." By intentionally placing a goal in the spotlight of working memory and keeping it there, we activate related long-term memories. These memories interact with consciousness, deepening focus and generating a strong internal signal that pushes distractions aside. Over time, this interaction becomes self-reinforcing, often leading to insights and moments of intense satisfaction.

Molip, in essence, is the deliberate control of consciousness. It involves holding a meaningful goal in the spotlight of awareness long enough for the unconscious to respond with its full resources. As long-term memory becomes strongly activated and begins to sustain consciousness on its own, immersion shifts from an effortful act to a stable mental state. In this state, thought itself becomes rewarding, distractions lose their power, and insight emerges naturally. Happiness, from this perspective, is not the objective of Molip but its consequence: it arises when consciousness and the unconscious operate in harmony, allowing the mind to remain deeply engaged, calm, and purposeful over time.

V. Bibliography

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