

The Argon Challenge

By Argon Vancouver

My name is Argon and I have a challenge for you:

Forgo what you desire for one month.

Our well-being does not come from our favorite foods, drink, sex, drugs or the satisfaction of our habits and cravings. Consider taking my challenge to explore the relationship between our desires and our happiness. Start with the attainable and remember, it's only for a month.

Today is January 3rd, 2009 and this month I am refraining from meat, dairy, alcohol, drugs (including caffeine and nicotine), refined sugars, sex, television, movies, gambling and the internet.

I quit them for a month not because they are bad for me. I quit them because to do so is good for me. It makes me stronger and more conscious that I need no thing for my contentment. This is my third challenge and each time, I add objects of desire to the list and each time the challenge gets easier as I get more skillful at letting go.

Why challenge yourself?

Here are three reasons:

1) Consciousness.

We must ask questions of our world in order to abide by our choices and limitations. In doing so, we are more engaged with our world and our selves. Our habitual patterns are swept away and our consciousness is raised.

2) Willpower.

To better choose the turns in our lives we exercise our will and strengthen our decision making process. This allows us to more skillfully guide our lives.

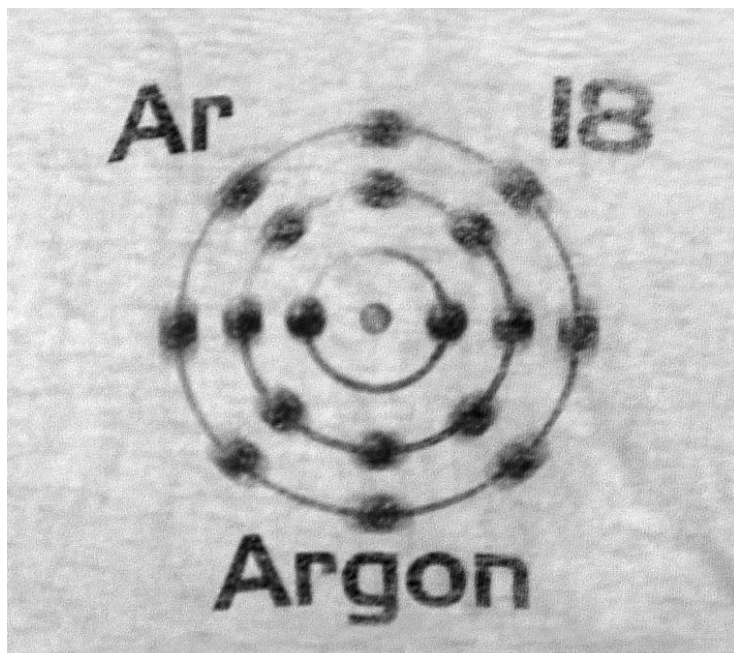
3) Non-attachment.

The things we chase in life are not the things that bring us happiness. This may be counter-intuitive but when we learn to give up the objects of our desire and find ourselves with as much or more happiness, we have proven it true.

The Argon Challenge offers an opportunity to explore the nature of desire by disrupting the cycle of want and reward. Our attachment to desire softens as we learn the source of happiness is within.

Why Argon?

I took the name Argon in 1999 when I went to Nevada's Black Rock Desert. I knew next to nothing about the gas when I chose the name but it has stuck with me and all the while I grow to more fully embody argon's positive attributes. Argon is odorless, colorless, non-toxic, non-corrosive and so non-reactive that it's called a "noble" gas.



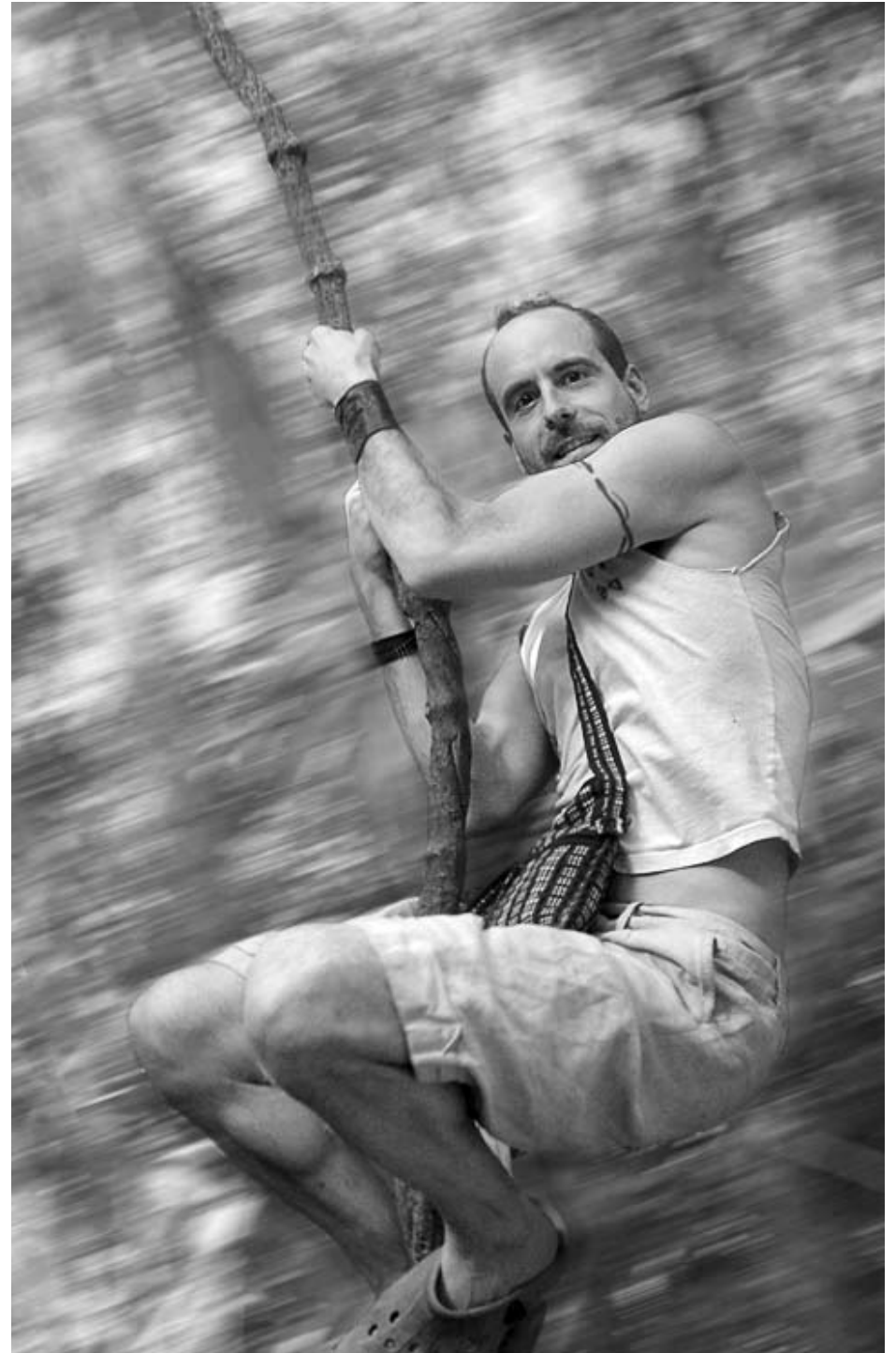
Argon comprises about one percent of the air we breathe. Its 18 electrons are so stable that only recently in laboratory conditions have we been able to bond argon with other elements. Atoms from these molecules aside, the argon we breathe is the same un-changed argon which the dinosaurs breathed. As you forgo the fruits of your desire, realize this effort may bring us closer to the satisfaction of the argon element.

January

A month seems a good amount of time for studying our relationship to desire, and while any month should do, after the excess of the holiday season seems an especially good time to re-establish what is necessary and what is habitual. This is my third January in a row to accept the Argon Challenge.

My challenges start when I wake from the New Years revelry which generally goes deep into the first of January. My challenges end at the midnight between January 31st and February 1st.

Of course, in a variety of ways, the challenge continues throughout the year and the lessons we take from this month may always inform our lives.



What do you chase?

Some habits may seem impossible to break. Some people have physical addictions and wrestle with their minds as well as the physical demands of their bodies. I met a woman who smoked one cigarette a day after dinner for 12 years. She may have been as tied to her nicotine as any smoker. Our routines and habits may be very difficult to change but effort put in that direction behooves us even when we return to our vices.

Please feel free to customize the Argon Challenge to suit the desires that you are ready to work with. Make this challenge your own. What can you quit it for a month? You may customize your challenge to span a longer or shorter amount of time. If you take a week without satisfying your desire, you may find a month becomes attainable. Work up to what you are capable of.

Good luck!



The Diet

If you choose to forgo meat, dairy and sugar for a month, you probably won't be able to eat at your regular haunts as much. You may find veggie burgers and garden salads are your only options. Even then, you may find most veggie burger patties contain dairy coagulants and most buns contain dairy and sugar. Share your challenges with your waiter or waitress and they will probably help to accommodate of your diet.

If you choose to find the restaurants and meals that cater to your restricted diet, you will discover many new and delicious ways to feed yourself. I suspect the month of your challenge may hold a surprising amount of discovery as mine consistently does.

Sugar

My friend, Jessica, quit sugar a couple months ago and to her surprise she found that her emotional ups and downs became much less dramatic and her work and home anxiety “vanished”. She found her affect clearly linked to her sugar intake. If you struggle on the emotional roller coaster, consider exploring your relationship with sugar through fasting.

Avoiding sugar requires much effort because it is so prevalent in our culture’s diet. There’s sugar in every sauce at my favorite Thai restaurants and in every barbecue sauce at my favorite BBQ restaurants. Sugar is added to most packaged food products, baked goods and even fruit juice.

To raise consciousness, will power and non-attachment, I recommend making sugar a part of your challenge. Read the packages and ask the questions of the people who feed you and eat accordingly. You may even find you operate better without sugar.



Nicotine

Nicotine is a powerful poison and also a great teacher. Two drops of pure nicotine on the tongue can easily kill a full-grown person. Nicotine kills millions every year, yet nicotine is also known for its sacred visionary and ceremonial powers to the first peoples of North America. I, too, have a gratitude for the teachings of this powerful substance.

I remember considering the addictive nature of nicotine when I bought my first pack of cigarettes in college. I thought, I was powerful enough to choose what I took into my body and the stronger its pull on me, the stronger I could be. I was right, of course, and it was nicotine that honed my strength and helped me realize how formidable my will could be. Without nicotine, I would not have known I had the strength to quit all that I desire. To the extent that I am free from my desires, I owe a debt of gratitude to nicotine. Through nicotine, I learned the techniques which evolved into the Argon Challenge.

The Infinite

On January first of 1995, I quit nicotine for one month. I found the nicotine fits seemed easy because my term of commitment was a prescribed amount of time. Quitting forever feels much more difficult because the mind squirms wildly when faced with the infinite. Spiritual wisdom tells us everything is temporary, so why endeavor to do something forever? At the end of the month, I positively reinforced my successful efforts with a cigarette.

The next time January came around, I chose to go one year without cigarettes. I found the start of the new year is a great time to quit because whatever the date is (month and day) that's how long you have been quit. From here it's easy to calculate how long there is to go before success has been achieved. Through this process, it occurred to me that a nicotine fit is when we are thinking about smoking. The trick (and that's not to say it's easy) is to not think about cigarettes. When I gained freedom from nicotine was when I could end the nicotine fit by saying, "I'm not smoking this month", or "I'm not smoking this year". Without such a goal in sight, my mind would try to convince me that I would smoke again at some point so why not get it over with sooner than later.

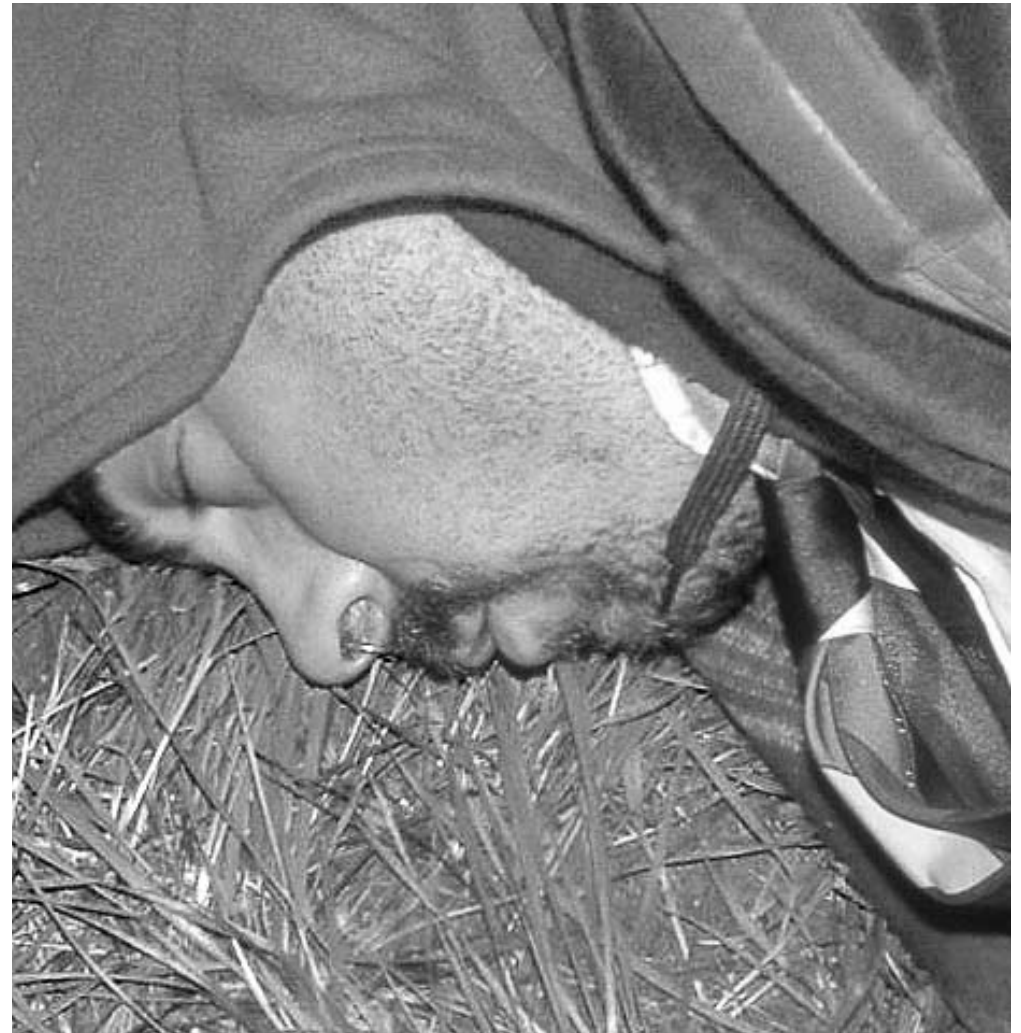
When those 366 days were through, I rewarded myself with a smoke. I soon found I much preferred being a non-smoker and 17 days later, I quit for two and a half years. Currently, though I have allowed some tobacco use, I haven't smoked a cigarette in eight years.

Alcohol

Some people can take it or leave it. Others have a very difficult time giving up alcohol. Sometimes we don't know what kind of hold a substance has on our bodies and minds until we take it away and find how much we miss it. Consider sampling an alcohol free life for 31 days to explore the depths of your dependency.

During the challenge, I like to go out and enjoy myself even though I'm not drinking alcohol. To remove one's self from temptation would be to avoid important lessons about attachment, consciousness and will power.

When you get to the bar, consider doing what I often do: order a cranberry and tonic with lime in a pint glass. It's twice as big at half the price and it tastes like a drink. You might even slur your words before you remember that it's alcohol free.



Gluten

When someone is incapable of processing gluten (a protein in wheat) correctly it's called Celiac disease and it can lead to a variety of health problems. Gluten intolerance is quite common and because gluten is so pervasive in our culture's diet, many only know the symptoms (such as irritable bowel syndrome, chronic lethargy and interminable skin irritations) and have given up on finding the cause. To quit gluten requires one to forgo many foods (most breads, crackers, soy sauce, beer, etc). Gluten-free alternatives are becoming much more prevalent because of the vast numbers of people whose digestion systems do not react well to gluten.

If you include gluten in the Argon Challenge and find that skin irritations, gastrointestinal irregularities or other mysterious and long standing symptoms clear up, consider exploring the possibility that you have a gluten intolerance. One thing I've noticed is that people who have found themselves to be gluten intolerant and are able to eat accordingly, tend to be very healthy people because they are in tune with their bodies and conscious of their diets.

Celibacy

People expect this one to be difficult but giving up sex for a month is a very empowering thing to do and not as difficult as you might think.

I was single when I first gave up sex as a part of the Argon Challenge. I wanted sex but I didn't have a partner so I figured that if I didn't have it anyway, why want it? The energy we spend trying to find sex (and love) would oftentimes be better spent in other ways. Certainly, to be in control of your desires adds sex appeal. Consider adding the restraint and clarity from this experience to your bag of tricks.

I have also practiced celibacy when I've been in sexual relationships. While celibacy may provide an opportunity to go deeper and to explore the other kinds of love which are at play, it may also strain the delicate balance between two people. Consider with your partner the conscious delay of this energetic exchange.

Masturbation

I'm not going to lie to you (because I gave that up years ago), I found quitting this one more difficult than quitting all my other desires combined.

I highly recommend it, though, because it's a powerful way to confront desire and build will power. That said, masturbation has not been a part of my Argon Challenge for two years. I am inclined to add it to an upcoming challenge to see if I can forgo it with less effort than before.



Juice Fasting

Today is January 15th, 2009 and I'm halfway through this year's Argon Challenge. I'm also halfway through my challenge within a challenge: I removed solid foods from my diet two and a half days ago. When I get hungry, I drink fresh squeezed vegetable juice and I enjoy a bowl of miso soup at night. I'm also drinking the Master Cleanse drink which consists of grade B maple syrup, lemon juice and cayenne pepper.

This is the second time I've incorporated a cleanse of my digestive system, liver and gall bladder into my Argon Challenge. It is a useful way to purge the body of toxins and also a further opportunity to explore the attachments of desire. Already, I feel cleaner inside and out. I feel more in control of my choices and I've lost some unnecessary body fat.

Be aware that juice fasts can be dangerous to maintain for long periods of time. Mine will be only five days which seems reasonable for resetting the expectations of the body and mind. I'm in no position to recommend longer fasts but I know people who have fasted for ten days and longer who feel the process has been helpful to them.

Lying

I quit this one long before I started the Argon Challenge and though lying may not be something we actively desire, I think it's worth mentioning here because we do desire the short-term reprieve from speaking difficult truths that misrepresenting ourselves can provide. In my experience, lying is more difficult in the long run even if we never get found out. Lying creates an alternate story which tends to get more and more convoluted and difficult to maintain. Lies tend to multiply, get bigger and grow less benign as they go.

Give up lying for one month and I think you'll find your life feels easier, more clear and more noble. Difficult truths especially are the ones we should endeavor to share most. You may find that to share a difficult truth feels like letting down a heavy burden. This kind of sharing invariably brings catharsis, respect and understanding.

Notice also that when you quit the habit of lying, you stand in a place of integrity. When someone doubts something you say, you can honestly say, "I don't lie". If they know you, they know they can trust what you have said.

Killing

Consider attempting a month without killing. Step over ants and don't swat the mosquitoes. This may be more difficult and more rewarding than you might suspect.



Substitution.

If you stop drinking alcohol, what takes its place? Is it more or less useful than your relationship with alcohol? Do you stay home and sleep or read? Do you watch more television? If you quit cigarettes, do you turn to candy or jogging?

Be conscious of substitutions. Some are detrimental, some are benign and some are useful. I like to read, write, practice yoga, meditate and spend time with friends. I have more time for working and I notice I sleep well and more fully. When you find detrimental substitutions take the place of objects of desire in your Argon challenge, consider adding them to your next challenge. This is an ongoing process of personal refinement. Each time we affect these changes in our lives we reinforce our ability to choose happiness over suffering.

Television

This may be a hard one to quit not because our desire might seem irresistible but because television is so ubiquitous. I've enjoyed meals in restaurants this month with screens glowing and flickering for my attention. I found it excellent practice for maintaining a highly tuned consciousness.

Movies

I love movies but through the course of last year's challenge, I found I was substituting movies for the television I endeavored to forgo. So I added movies to the list. My life feels less vicarious, more my own and more interesting without letting the silver screen characters live adventures for me. Subsequently, I feel my own drama more compelling. As useful as it has been to my current Argon Challenge, I'm eager to reintroduce this experience next month.

Internet

The internet is an amazing tool and I'm indebted to it for having linked our minds together in such a cohesive and enlightened manner. That said, having quit the internet two weeks ago has been liberating because of how habitual it had become. I feel more conscious of my own experience and more engaged with the present time and place. I've also found myself with enough free time to write this book.

Fossil Fuel Transportation

I've found I can also give up fossil fuel transportation for a month. I walked and I rode my bicycle. I got in shape, saved money and I had more fun doing it. With the introduction of this challenge, I felt that my impact on this world was only positive. I recommend this challenge most highly. Try it for a week if a month seems unattainable.

What Else Can I Forgo?

You can give up almost everything and remain satisfied though it takes practice. I'm considering a month without talking. I'm considering a month without using electronic devices. The more difficult the challenge, the more we can learn from it. Remember, nearly a hundred percent of your ancestors went without what we have come to consider invaluable. To live like they did serves us to better understand our selves and our time and where we come from.

Exceptions

I've allowed myself exceptions to some of the rules to make them more feasible. For instance, I chose to forgo internet but because my job hours are logged on the internet, I allow an exception for this without feeling compromised. I've also allowed myself to check my email once a day from work because I have two friends in Mexico I hope to visit next month that I only communicate with through email. For my next challenge, "surfing the internet" may be on the list instead of "internet". Try to make these exceptions for yourself before the challenge begins. You may even make a conscious exception in the midst of the challenge as I did yesterday for a friend. It's your challenge and your choices.

Slip ups

In an effort to forgo alcohol, I drank a tangerine soda at a party. Only half way through, did I realize that it contained sugar and passed it off to a friend. Remember that we do this to expand our consciousness, our will power and our understanding of the nature of our desires. I'm inclined to consider that half a can of soda a teacher and let myself off easy. If you slip up by mistake, try not to let it get in the way of the continuing challenge. If you slip up because you can't seem to resist the desire for an item on your list, redefine your Argon Challenge to make it more attainable. In time, you may ramp the challenge back up to include the objects of desire which once seemed irresistible.

Learning to live and die

Our lives start with everything we need delivered through a tube into our bellies. We are surrounded, protected and fed by our mothers. Through the process of life, we learn to give up our oneness with this source. Then we give up her milk and then our toys and our training wheels. As we get older, we learn to let go of all that we love: our pets, our grandparents, our youth, our vocations, our health and ultimately, we let go of our lives.

A spiritual teacher of mine told me that life appears to be a process which teaches us how to die. Through this process, we cultivate the grace of letting go. To not be attached allows us to enjoy the gift which is our life. Once we discover that this is the nature of our game, we learn to look for the attachments which remain (or continue to develop) so that we may release them. Future suffering is released with each attachment that is severed.

In the three years that I've been practicing and expanding on the Argon Challenge, I've seen the challenge become easier and easier. Today is January twentieth and it has been relatively easy. Letting go is something that we can become masters at. Endeavor to become so accepting of the letting go that when the time comes we can let go of our lives with grace.

The Return

Whether you last the full term you've set for yourself or not, allow yourself to step down off the wagon with grace. This can be even more challenging than climbing on the wagon.

Consider restraint when allowing yourself to re-establish a relationship with your vices. If you smoke medical marijuana, realize a small puff will bring what bong loads would not achieve before. This is because your tolerance to the THC has diminished.

The Argon Challenge may be a useful way to explore and confront your relationship to physically addictive substances but recognize there may be great danger here. If you return to heroin, for instance, with the same size dose you used before your tolerance diminished, you are likely to overdose yourself. This is a leading cause of heroin related deaths. A manageable dose may be closer to the size of your first dose before you developed a tolerance.





Finishing

Savor the return to your favorite things and consider doing so with the same consciousness of decisions that you've cultivated throughout the challenge. Also, consider extending the fast or restricting the use of the vices that don't serve you.

Consider postponing or establishing conditions under which you may allow yourself these rewards. Set them aside as incentives for personal growth; to encourage travel, find a new job or start a new relationship. I've finished my last two challenges by waiting until landing on foreign soil before drinking alcohol. These are powerful motivators and they may be used as positive reinforcement for our efforts.



The Difficulty

Letting go of desires can feel like holding a trunk lid closed. It may seem like constant vigilant force is required to keep the desirables inside which squirm and bang to be released. It can be difficult, tiring and it may seem the trunk lid will open eventually despite your best efforts. Taking on the Argon Challenge may feel like this to you at first.

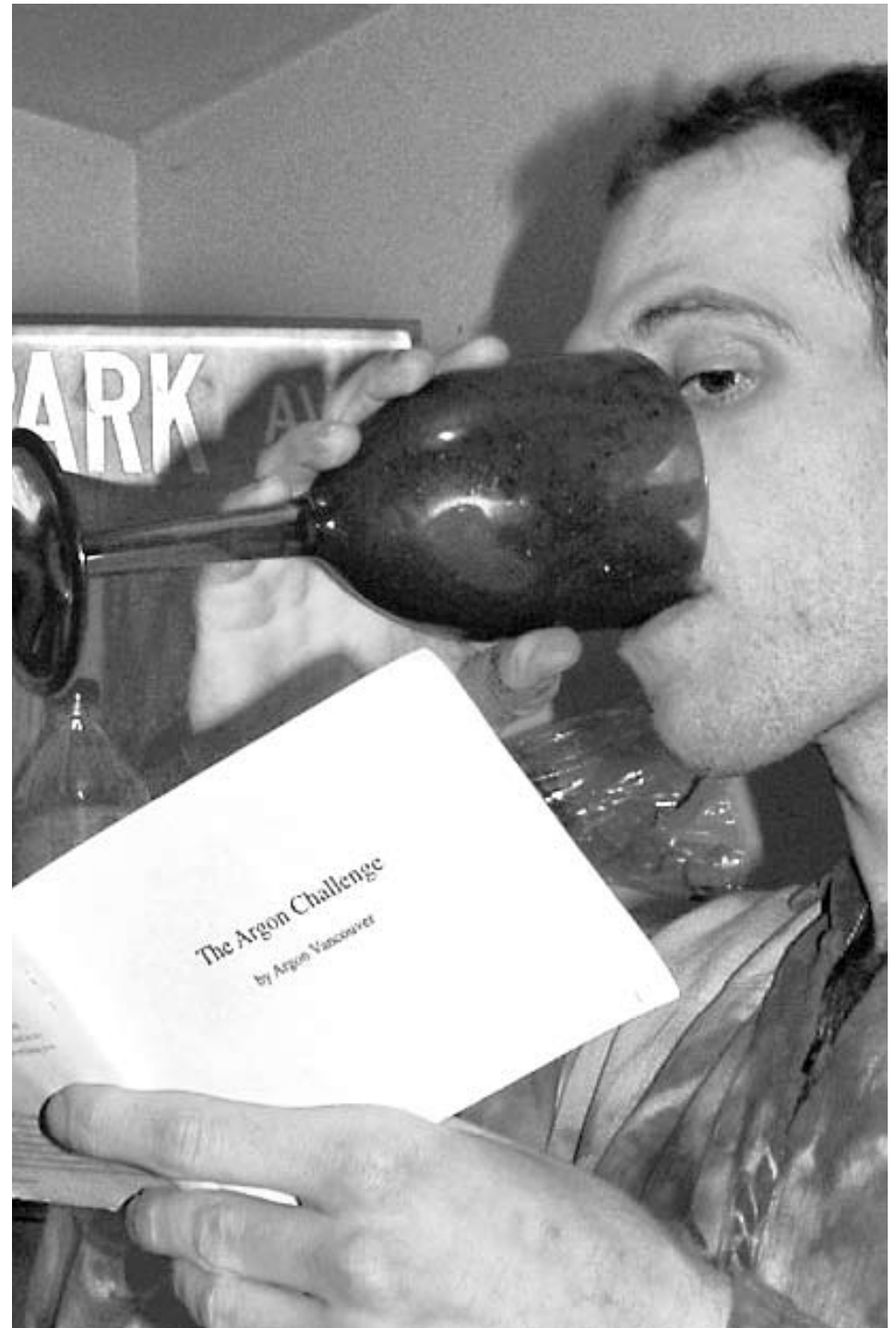
Letting go may also feel like holding a butterfly in your open hand. It requires no effort and the object of desire is free to flutter away. With practice, this is how the Argon Challenge may feel to you.

The extent to which we are in control of our minds determines whether such a challenge feels like holding a trunk closed or letting a butterfly be free. Practice the letting go. It gets easier as we grow stronger and more in control of our desires.

Failure

About ten days into the challenge, I start hearing about the Argon challengers who have fallen off the wagon. Inevitably, some people will lose their resolve and return to that which they endeavored to forgo. I'm quick to point out that the effort they invested has produced the desired effects: they are more conscious of their relationship to their fruits of desire, they have exercised their will and are better prepared to go further with their practice of letting go.

It appears the gains of consciousness and willpower we make are cumulative. Self deprivation is something we may learn to do gracefully. Each success and each failure informs our next efforts.



The Benefits

The benefits of the Argon Challenge continue to reward even after the fasting has finished. The willpower, the awareness and the non-attachment stay with us even as we allow the objects of our desire to return. Enjoy reintroducing the objects of desire into your life while realizing they are not necessary for your happiness. Your happiness requires no thing. Masters of happiness may lose their home and country and still recognize their every moment as divine.

Fast with Grace

Here's how you get the Argon Challenge special bonus points: watch in your mind and in your conversation the temptation to aggrandize or bemoan your efforts. The desire for sympathy and respect can be a strong addiction and even less glamorous than a cigarette addiction. Resist seeking sympathy or respect for your efforts. Endeavor to fast with grace.



Argon's Famous 'For the Birds' Wrap Recipe!

Nori seaweed sheets
Tahini (sesame) sauce
Sea salt
Avocado
Spinach
Onions
Peppers
Goji berries
And the secret ingredient:
Hemp seeds roasted in organic
hemp oil seasoned
with dill and sea salt



Although hemp seeds are the most balanced and complete source of protein for human consumption, I can currently find no FDA approved sources for whole hemp seeds in my area. While they are legal to sell, it is very difficult to run a hemp seed food business because of the grey legal status of the cannabis plant. They are, however, readily available as bird seed from many pet stores as hemp seeds are the number one bird seed in the country. Roast hemp seeds in hemp oil and sprinkle them on your wrap liberally. The Argon Wrap is healthy, delicious, and with almost no dishes to clean. Enjoy.

“It’s a good reminder that there remain things in life that self-discipline alone can conquer... and it makes me wish there were more things within such control, especially in a world where what we want to accomplish always seems to require not just the spark of will, but a few breaks along the way...”

~Lantern

“No meat since Christmas, no dairy since a week after that, no bread either. I haven’t eaten any sugar (including fruit sugar) in over eight months. No alcohol for nearly a year (and I have no will power, really). I have really had to battle with this because I didn’t choose it. I have no choice if I want to survive. I’m very impressed though. Because I would never have done it just to be more healthy, or just to get my meditation higher.

Anyway, cheers for learning the lesson before nature makes you. It sounds much more gentle. Take it from me, people, start working on your vices before they start working on you.”

~Cheshire

You may call it a cleanse, I call it a challenge.

As we grow older, we learn that the indulgence of our desire for sex, drugs, alcohol and food is not a true path to happiness. Money, privilege and their enticements, seem to bring fleeting satisfaction followed by more want and a greater separation from contentment. Disengage from the compulsion to satisfy cravings. Detach your happiness from the circumstances of life. Cultivate an inner happiness. From here we may appreciate the fruits of life without depending on them.

The objects of our desire are spiritual tools if we use them to build ourselves into stronger, healthier and more content humans. I challenge you to use them by learning to let them go gracefully. Challenge your will to make it powerful. Challenge your consciousness to raise it higher. Challenge your self to become more comfortable, stronger and more engaged with your self and your world.

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Thanks for the inspiration to write this book. I'm humbled that so many of you took up the challenge. Thanks to Marklar for the nudge to put "The Argon Challenge" in writing. Thanks to everyone who has shared their experiences. Thanks also to the waiters and waitresses who have been unerringly accommodating of my peculiar eating 'habits'. Thanks finally, to you, for reading this book and allowing my ideas to inform yours.

~Argon Vancouver

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